

The Beatitudes, And Other Sermons



ALEXANDER MACLAREN



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The Beatitudes, And Other Sermons

THE BEATITUDES

AND OTHER SERMONS

BY

ALEXANDER MACLAREN B.A. D.D.

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I.

The First Beatitude.

“BLESSED are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”—MATT. v. 3.



E are not come unto the mount that burned with fire, nor unto the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of ‘awful’ words.” With such accompaniments the old law was promulgated, but here, in this Sermon on the Mount, as it is called, the laws of the Kingdom are proclaimed by the King Himself; and He does not lay them down with the sternness of those written on tables of stone. No rigid “thou shalt” compels, no iron “thou shalt not” forbids; but each precept is linked with a blessing, and every characteristic that is required is enforced by the thought that it contributes to our highest good. It fitted well Christ’s character, and the lips “into which grace is poured,” that He spake His laws under the guise of these beatitudes.

This, the first of them, is dead in the teeth of flesh and sense, a paradox to the men who judge good and evil by things external and visible, but deeply, everlastingly, unconditionally, and inwardly true. All

that the world commends and pats on the back, Christ condemns, and all that the world shrinks from and dreads, Christ bids us make our own, and assures us that in it we shall find our true blessing. "The poor in spirit," they are the happy men.

The reason for the benediction is as foreign to law and earthly thoughts as is the benediction of which it is the reason—"for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Poverty of spirit will not further earthly designs, nor be an instrument for what the world calls success and prosperity. But it will give us something better than earth, it will give us heaven. Do you think that that *is* better than earth, and should you be disposed to acquiesce in the benediction of those who may lose the world's gifts but are sure to have heaven's felicities?

Now, I think I shall best deal with these words by considering, most simply, the fundamental characteristic of a disciple of Jesus Christ, and the blessed issues of that character.

I.—First, then, the fundamental characteristic of Christ's disciples.

Now it is to be noticed that Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, which is much briefer than Matthew's, omits the words "in spirit," and so seems at first sight to be an encomium and benediction upon the outward condition of earthly poverty. Matthew, on the other hand, says "poor in spirit." And the difference between the two evangelists has given occasion to some to maintain that one or the other of them misunderstood Christ's meaning, and modified His expression either by omission or enlargement. But if

you will notice another difference between the two forms in the saying in the two Gospels, you will, I think, find an explanation of the one already referred to ; for Matthew's Beatitudes are general statements, "Blessed *are*" ; and Luke's are addresses to the circle of the disciples, "Blessed *are ye*." And if we duly consider that difference, we shall see that the general statement necessarily required the explanation which Matthew's version appends to it, in order to prevent the misunderstanding that our Lord was setting so much store by earthly conditions as to suppose that virtue and blessedness were uniformly attached to any of these. Jesus Christ was no vulgar demagogue flattering the poor and inveighing against the rich Luke's "*ye* poor" shows at once that Christ was not speaking about all the poor in outward condition, but about a certain class of such. No doubt the bulk of His disciples were poor men who had been drawn or driven by their sense of need to open their hearts to Him. Outward poverty is a blessing if it drives men to God ; it is not a blessing if, as is often the case, it drives men from Him ; or, as is still oftener the case, if it leaves men negligent of Him. So that Matthew's enlargement is identical in meaning with Luke's condensed form, regard being had to the difference in the structure of the two Beatitudes.

And so we come just to this question—What is this poverty of spirit ? I do not need to waste your time in saying what it is not. To me it seems to be a lowly and just estimate of myself, my character, my achievements, based upon a clear recognition of my own necessities, weaknesses, and sins.

The "poor in spirit"—I wonder if it would be very reasonable for a moth that flits about the light, or a gnat that dances its hour in the sunbeam, to be proud because it had longer wings, or prettier markings on them, than some of its fellows. Is it much more reasonable for us to plume ourselves on, and set much store by, anything that we are, or have done? Two or three plain questions, to which the answers are quite as plain, ought to rip up this swollen bladder of self-esteem which we are all apt to blow. "What hast thou that thou hast not received?" Where did you get it? How came you by it? How long is it going to last? Is it such a very big thing after all? You have written a book; you are clever as an operator, an experimenter; you are a successful student. You have made a pile of money in Manchester; you have been prosperous in your earthly career, and can afford to look upon men that are failures and beneath you in social position with a smile of pity, or of contempt, as the case may be. Well! I suppose the distance to the nearest fixed star is pretty much the same from the top of one ant-hill in a wood as from the top of the next one, though the one may be a foot higher than the other. I suppose that we have all come out of nothing, and are anything, simply because God is everything. If He were to withhold His upholding and inbreathing power from any of us for one moment, we should shrivel into nothingness like a piece of paper calcined in the fire, and go back into that vacuity out of which His fiat, and His fiat alone, called us. And yet here we are, setting great store, some of us, by our qualities

or belongings, and thinking ever so much of ourselves because we possess them, and all the while we are but great emptinesses ; and the things of which we are so proud are what God has poured into us.

You think that is all commonplace. Bring it into your lives, brethren ; apply it to your estimate of yourselves, and your expectations from other people, and you will be delivered from the bigger half of the annoyances and the miseries of your present.

But the deepest reason for a habitual and fixed lowly opinion of ourselves lies in a sadder fact. We are not only recipient nothingnesses ; we have something that is our own, and that is our will, and we have lifted it up against God. And if a man's position as a dependent creature should take all lofty looks and high spirit out of him, his condition as a sinful man before God should lay him flat on his face in the presence of that Majesty ; and should make him put his hand on his lips, and say, from behind the covering, " Unclean ! unclean ! " Oh, brethren, if we would only go down into the depths of our own hearts, every one of us would find there more than enough to make all self-complacency and self-conceit utterly impossible, as it ought to be, for us for ever. I have no wish, and God knows I have no need, to exaggerate about this matter ; but we all know that if we were turned inside out, and every foul, creeping thing, and every blotch and spot upon these hearts of ours spread in the light, we could not face one another ; we could scarcely face ourselves. If you or I were set, as they used to set criminals, up in a pillory with a board hanging round our necks, telling

all the world what we were, and what we had done, there would be no need for rotten eggs to be flung at us; we should abhor ourselves. You know that is so. I know that it is so about myself, "and heart answereth to heart as in a glass." And are we the people to perk ourselves up amongst our fellows, and say, "I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing"? Do we not know that we are poor and miserable and blind and naked? Oh, brethren, the proud old saying of the Greeks, "Know thyself," if it were followed out unflinchingly and honestly by the purest saint this side heaven, would result in this profound abnegation of all claims, in this poverty of spirit.

So little has the world been influenced by Christ's teaching that it uses "poor-spirited creature" as a term of opprobrium and depreciation. It ought to be the very opposite; for only the man who has been down into the dungeons of his own character, and has cried unto God out of the depths, will be able to make the house of his soul a fabric which may be a temple of God, and with its shining apex may pierce the clouds and seem almost to touch the heavens. A great poet has told us that the things which lead life to sovereign power are self-knowledge, self-reverence, and self-control. And in a noble sense it is true, but the deepest self-knowledge will lead to self-abhorrence rather than to self-reverence; and self-control is only possible when, knowing our own inability to cope with our own evil, we cast ourselves on that Lamb of God that beareth away the sin of the world, and ask Him to guide and to keep us. The one attitude for us is,

“ He did not so much as lift up His eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.” And then, sweeter than angels’ voices fluttering down amid the blue, there will come that gracious word, “ Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

II. Turn, now, to the blessed issues of this characteristic.

Christ does not say “ joyful,” “ mirthful,” “ glad.” These are poor, vulgar words by the side of the depth and calmness and permanence which are involved in that great word “ blessed.” It is far more than joy, which may be turbulent and is often impure. It is far deeper than any gladness which has its sources in the outer world, and it abides when joys have vanished, and all the song-birds of the spring are silent in the winter of the soul. “ Blessed are the poor . . . for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The bulk of the remaining Beatitudes point onward to a future ; this deals with the present ; not “ *shall be*,” but “ *is* the Kingdom.” It is an all-comprehensive promise, holding the succeeding ones within itself, for they are but diverse aspects — modified according to the necessities which they supply—of that one encyclopædia of blessings, the possession of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now the Kingdom of Heaven (or of God) is a state in which the will of God is absolutely and perfectly obeyed. It is capable of partial realisation here, and is sure of complete fulfilment hereafter. To the early hearers of these words the phrase would necessarily suggest the idea which bulked so large in

prophecy and in Judaism, of the Messianic Kingdom ; and we may well lay hold of that thought to suggest the first of the elements of this blessedness. That poverty of spirit is blessed because it is an indispensable condition of becoming Christ's men and subjects. I believe, dear friends, for my part, that the main reason why so many of us are not out-and-out Christian men and women, having entered really into that kingdom which is obedience to God in Christ, is because we have a superficial knowledge, or no knowledge at all, of our own sinful condition, and of the gravity of that fact. Intellectually, I take it that an under estimate of the universality and of the awfulness of sin has a great deal to do in shaping all the maimed, imperfect, partial views of Christ, His character and nature, which afflict the world. It is the mother of most of our heresies. And, practically, if you do not feel any burden, you do not care to hear about One who will carry it. If you have no sense of need, the message that there is a supply will fall perfectly ineffectual upon your ears. If you have not realised the truth that whatever else you may be to be proud of—wise, clever, beautiful, accomplished, rich, prosperous—you have this to take all the self-conceit out of you, that you are a sinful man ; if you have not realised that, it will be no gospel to you that Jesus Christ has died, the just for the unjust, and lives to cleanse us.

Brethren, there is only one way into the true and full possession of Christ's salvation, and that is poverty of spirit. It is the narrow door, like the mere low slits in the wall which in ancient times were

the access to some wealth-adorned palace or stately structure—narrow openings that a man had to stoop his lofty crest in order to enter. If you have never been down on your knees before God, feeling what a wicked man or woman you are, I doubt hugely whether you will ever stand with radiant face before God, and praise Him through eternity for His mercy to you. If you want to have Christ for yours, you must begin, where He begins His Beatitudes, with that poverty of spirit.

It is blessed because it invites the riches of God to come and make us wealthy. It draws towards itself communication of God's infinite self, with all His quickening and cleansing and humbling powers. Grace is attracted by the sense of need, just as the lifted finger of the lightning rod brings down fire from heaven. The heights are barren. It is in the valleys that rivers run, and flowers bloom. "God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble." If we desire to have Him, who is the one source of all blessedness in our hearts, as a true possession, we must open the door for His entrance by poverty of spirit. Desire brings fulfilment; and they who know their wants, and only they, will truly long that they may be supplied.

This poverty of spirit is blessed because it is its own reward. All self-esteem and self-complacency are like a hedgehog, as someone has said, "rolled up the wrong way, tormenting itself with its prickles." And the man that is always, or often, thinking how much above A., B., or C. he is, and how much A., B., or C. ought to offer of incense to him, is sure to get more

cuffs than compliments, more enmity than affection ; and will be sore all over with wounded vanities of all sorts. But if we have learned ourselves, and have departed from these lofty thoughts, then to be humble in spirit is to be wise, cheerful, contented, simple, restful in all circumstances. You remember John Bunyan's shepherd boy, down in the valley of humiliation. *Heart's-ease* grew there, and his song was, "He that is low need fear no fall." If we have this true, deep-rooted poverty of spirit, we shall be below the tempest, which will go clean over our heads. The oaks catch the lightnings ; the grass and the primroses are unsinged. "The day of the Lord shall be upon all high things, and the loftiness of men shall be brought low."

So, dear brethren, blessedness is not to be found outside us. We need not ask "who shall go up into the heavens, or who shall descend into the deep," to bring it. It is in thee, if at all. Christ teaches us that the sources of all true blessedness are within us ; there or nowhere is Eden. If we have the tempers and dispositions of these great Beatitudes, condition matters but very little. If the source of all blessedness is within us, the first step to it all is poverty of spirit. "Be ye clothed with humility." The Master girt Himself with the servant's towel, and His disciples are to copy Him who said : "Take My yoke upon you. . . . I am meek and lowly in heart . . . and ye shall find rest"—and is not that blessedness ?—"ye shall find rest unto your souls."

II.

The Second Beatitude.

"BLESSED are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."—
MATT. v. 4.



N ordinary superficial view of these so-called Beatitudes is that they are simply a collection of unrelated sayings. But they are a great deal more than that. There is a vital connection and progress in them. The jewels are not flung down in a heap; they are wreathed into a chain, which whosoever wears shall have "an ornament of grace about his neck." They are an outgrowth from a common root; stages in the evolution of Christian character.

Now, I tried to show in a former sermon how the root of them all is the poverty of spirit which is spoken of in the preceding verse; and how it really does lie at the foundation of the highest type of human character, and in its very self is sure of possessing the Kingdom of Heaven. And now I turn to the second of these Beatitudes. Like all the others, it is a paradox, for it starts from a wholly different conception from the common one of what is man's chief good. If the aims which usually engross us are really the true aims of life, then there

is no meaning of this saying of our Lord, for then it had been better not to sorrow at all than to sorrow and be comforted. But if the true purpose for which we are all gifted with this solemn gift of life is that we may become "imitators of God as dear children," then there are few things for which men should be more thankful than the sacred sorrow, than which there are few instruments more powerful for creating the type of character which we are set here to make our own. All lofty, dignified, serious thinkers and poets (who for the most of men are the best teachers) had said this same thing before Christ. But He says it with a difference all His own, which deepens incalculably its solemnity, and sets the truth of the otherwise sentimental saying, which flies often in the face of human nature, upon immovable foundations.

Let me ask you, then, just to look for a moment with me, in the simplest possible way, at the two thoughts of our text, Who are the mourners that are "blessed"? and What is the consolation that they receive?

I.—The mourners who are blessed.

"Blessed are they that mourn." Ah! That is not a universal bliss. All mourners are *not* blessed. It would be good news, indeed, to a world so full of miseries that men sometimes think it were better not to be, and holding so many wrecked and broken hearts, if every sorrow had its benediction. But just as we saw in a former discourse that the poverty which Christ pronounced blessed is not mere straitness of circumstances, or lack of material wealth, so here the sorrow round the head of which he casts this halo of

glory is not that which springs from the mere alteration of external circumstances, or from any natural causes. The influence of the first saying runs through all the Beatitudes, and since it is "the poor in spirit" who are there pronounced happy, so here we must go far deeper than mere outward condition, in order to find the ground of the benediction pronounced. Let us be sure, to begin with, of this, that no condition, be it of wealth or woe, is absolutely and necessarily good, but that the seat of all true blessedness lies within, in the disposition which rightly meets the conditions which God sends.

So I would say, first, that the mourners whom Christ pronounces "blessed" are those who are "poor in spirit." The mourning is the emotion which follows upon that poverty. The one is the recognition of the true estimate of my own character and failings; the other is the feeling that follows upon that recognition. The one is the prophet's clear-sighted "I am a man of unclean lips"; the other is the same prophet's contemporaneous wail, "Woe is me, for I am undone; for I am a man of unclean lips."

And surely, brethren, if you and I have ever had anything like a glimpse of what we really are, and have brought ourselves into the light of God's face, and have pondered upon our characters and our doings in that—not "fierce" but—all-searching, "light" that flashes from Him, there can be no attitude, no disposition, more becoming the best, the purest, the noblest of us than that "Woe is me, for I am undone."

Oh, dear friends, if—not as a theological term, but as a clinging, personal fact—we realise what sin against God is, what must necessarily come from it, what aggravation His gentleness, His graciousness, His constant beneficence bring—how facilely we do the evil thing and then wipe our lips and say, “We have done no harm”—we should be more familiar than we are with the depths of this experience of mourning for sin.

I cannot too strongly urge upon you my own conviction—it may be worth little, but I am bound to speak it—that there are few things which the so-called Christianity of this day needs more than an intenser realisation of the fact, and the gravity of the fact, of personal sinfulness. There lies the root of the shallowness of so much that calls itself Christianity in the world to-day. It is the source of almost all the evils under which the Church is groaning. And sure I am that if millions of the people that complacently put themselves down in the census as Christians could but once see themselves as they are, and connect their conduct with God’s thought about it, they would get a shock that would sober them. And sure I am that if they do not thus see themselves here and now, they will one day get a shock that will stupify them. And so, dear friends, I urge upon you, as I would upon myself, as the foundation and first step towards all the sunny heights of God-likeness and blessedness—go down, down deep into the hidden corners, and see how, like the elders of Israel that the prophet beheld in the dark chamber, we worship creeping things, abominable things, lust-

ful things, in the recesses within. And then we shall possess more of that poverty of spirit, and the conscious recognition of our own true character shall merge into the mourning which is altogether blessed.

Now, note, again, how such sorrow will refine and ennable character. How different our claims upon other men would be if we possessed this sober, saddened estimate of what we really are! How our petulance, and arrogance, and insisting upon what is due to us of respect and homage and deference would all disappear! How much more rigid would be our guard upon ourselves, our own emotions, our own inclinations and tastes! How much more lenient would be our judgment of the openly and confessedly naughty ones, who have gone a little further in act, but not an inch further in essence, than we have done! How different our attitude to our fellows; and how lowly our attitude to God! Such sorrow would sober us, would deliver us from our lusting after the gauds of earth, would make us serious and reflective, would bring us to that "sad, wise valour" which is the conquering characteristic of humanity.

There is nothing more contemptible than the lives which, for want of this self-knowledge, foam away in idle mirth, and effervesce in what the world calls "high spirits."

"There is no music in a life
That sounds with idiot laughter solely,
There's not a string attuned to mirth
But has its chords in melancholy."

So said one whose reputation in English literature is mainly as a humourist. He had learned that the

only noble humanity is that in which the fountains of laughter and of tears lie so close together that their waters intermingle. I beseech you not to confound the "laughter of fools," which is the "crackling of thorns under the pot," with the true, solemn, ennobling gladness which lives along with this sorrow of my text.

Further, such mourning infused into the sorrow that comes from external disasters will make it blessed too. As I have said, there is nothing in any condition of life which necessarily and universally makes it blessed. Though poets and moralists and Christian people have talked a great deal, and beautifully and truly, about the sanctifying and sweetening influences of calamity, do not let us forget that there are perhaps as many people made worse by their sorrows as are made better by them. There is such a thing as being made sullen, hard, selfish, negligent of duty, resentful against God, hopeless, by the pressure of our calamities. Blessed be God, there is such a thing as being drawn to Him by them. Then they, too, come within the sweep of this benediction of the Master, and the outward distress melts into the sorrow which is blessed. A drop or two of this tincture, the mourning which comes from poverty of spirit, slipped into the cup of affliction, clears and sweetens the waters, and makes them a tonic bitter. Brethren, if our outward losses and disappointments and pains help us to apprehend, and are accepted by us in the remembrance of, our own unworthiness, then these, too, are God's sweet gifts to us.

One word more. This mourning is perfectly com-

patible with, and indeed is experienced in its purest form only along with, the highest and purest joy. I have been speaking about the indispensable necessity of such sadness for all noble life. But let us remember, on the other hand, that nobody has so much reason to be glad as he has who, in poverty of spirit, has clasped and possesses the wealth of the Kingdom. And if a man, side by side with this profound and saddened sense of his own sinfulness, has not a hold of the higher thing—Christ's righteousness given to penitence and faith—then his knowledge of his own unworthiness is still too shallow to inherit a benediction. There is no reason why, side by side in the Christian heart, there should not lie—there is every reason why there must lie—these two things, not mutually discrepant and contradictory, but capable of being blended together—the mourning which is blessed, and the joy which is unspeakable and full of glory.

II.—And now a word or two with regard to the consolation which such mourning is sure to receive.

It is not true, whatever sentimentalists may say, that all sorrow is comforted and therefore blessed. It may be forgotten. Pain may sting less; men may betake themselves to trivial, or false, unworthy, low alleviations, and fancy that they are comforted when they are only diverted. But the sorrow meant in my text necessarily ensures for every man who possesses it the consolation which follows. That consolation is both present and future.

As for the present, the mourning which is based,

as our text bases it, on poverty of spirit, will certainly bring after it the consolation of forgiveness and of cleansing. Christ's gentle hand laid upon us, to cause our guilt to pass away, and the inveterate habits of inclination towards evil to melt out of our nature, is His answer to His child's cry, "Woe is me, for I am undone." And anything is more probable than that Christ, hearing a man thus complain of himself before Him, should fail to send His swift answer.

Ah, brethren, you will never know how deep and ineffably precious are the consolations which Christ can give, unless you have learned despair of self, and have come empty, helpless, hopeless, and yet confident, to that great Lord. Make your hearts empty, and He will fill them ; recognise your desperate condition, and He will lift you up. The deeper down we go into the depths the surer is the rebound, and the higher the soaring to the zenith. It is those who have poverty of spirit, and mourning based upon it, and only they, who pass into the sweetest, sacredest, secretest recesses of Christ's heart, and there find all-sufficient consolation.

In like manner, that consolation will come in its noblest and most sufficing form to those who take their outward sorrows, and link them with this sense of their own ill-desert. Oh, dear friends, if I am speaking to anybody who to-day has a burdened heart, be sure of this, that the way to consolation lies through submission ; and that the way to submission lies through recognition of our own sin. If we will only "lie still, let Him strike home, and bless the rod,"

the rod will blossom and bear fruit. The water of the cataract would not flash into rainbow tints against the sunshine, unless it had been dashed into spray against black rocks. And if you and I will but say with good old Dr. Watts:

"When His strokes are felt,
His strokes are fewer than our crimes,
And lighter than our guilt,"

it will not be hard to bow down and say, "Thy will be done," and with submission consolation will be ours.

Is there anything to say about that future consolation? Very little, for we know very little. But "God Himself shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." The hope of that consolation is itself consolation, and the hope becomes all the more bright when we know and measure the depths of our own evil. Earth needs to be darkened in order that the magic, ethereal beauty of the glow in the western heavens may be truly seen. The sorrow of earth is the background on which the light of heaven is painted.

So, dear friends, be sure of this, the one thing which ought to move a man to sadness is his own character. For all other causes of grief are instruments for good. And be sure of this, too, that the one thing which can ensure consolation adequate to the grief is bringing the grief to the Lord Christ and asking Him to deal with it. His first word of ministry ran parallel with these two Beatitudes. When He spoke the latter He began with poverty of spirit, and

passed to mourning and consolation. And when He opened His lips in the synagogue of Nazareth He began with, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach good tidings unto the poor, to give unto them that mourn in Zion a diadem for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."



III.

The Third Beatitude.

"BLESSED are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."—
MATT. v. 5.



THE originality of Christ's moral teaching lies not so much in the novelty of His precepts as in the new relation in which He sets them, the deepening which He gives them, the motives on which He bases them, and the power which He communicates to keep them. Others before Him had pronounced a benediction on the meek, but our Lord means far more than they did, and, both in His description of the character and in the promise which He attaches, vindicates the uniqueness of His notion of a perfect man.

The world's ideal is, on the whole, very different from His. It inclines to the more conspicuous and so-called heroic virtues; it prefers a great, flaring, yellow sunflower to the violet hiding among the grass, and making its presence known only by fragrance. "Blessed are the strong, who can hold their own," says the world. "Blessed are the meek," says Christ.

The Psalmist had said it before Him, and had

attached verbally the same promise to the word. But our Lord means more than David did when he said "The meek shall inherit the earth." I ask you to think with me this morning, first, what this Christian meekness is; then, whence it issues; and then, whither it leads.

I.—What Christian meekness is.

Now, the ordinary use of the word is to describe an attitude, or more properly a disposition, in regard to men, especially in regard to those who deprecate, or wrong, or harm us. But the Christian conception of meekness, whilst it includes that, goes far deeper; and, primarily, has reference to our attitude, or rather our disposition, towards God. And in that aspect, What is it? Meek endurance and meek obedience; the accepting of His dealings, of whatever complexion they are, and however they may tear or desolate our hearts, without murmuring, without sulking, without rebellion or resistance, is the deepest conception of the meekness which Christ pronounces blessed. When sorrow comes upon us, unless we have something more than natural strength bestowed upon us, we are all but certain, like fractious children when beaten, to kick and plunge and scream, or to take the infliction of the sorrow as being an affront and an injury. If we have any claim to this benediction, we must earn it by accepting our sorrows; and the accepted sorrow becomes a solemn joy, or almost akin thereto. The ox that kicks against the goads only does two things thereby; it does not get away from them, but it wounds its own hocks, and it drives the sharp points deeper into the ragged wounds. Let

Him strike, dear friend, for when He strikes He cuts clean ; and there is no poison on the edge of His knife. Meekness towards God is, first, patient endurance of His Will.

And, in reference to Him, it is, next, unquestioning docility and obedience. Its seat is in the will. When the will is bowed, a man is far on his road to perfection ; and the meaning of all that God does with us—joys and sorrows, light and darkness, when His hand gives, and when His hand withdraws, as when His authoritative voice commands, and the sweet impulses of His love graciously constrain—is that our wills may be made plastic and flexible, like a bit of wrought leather, to every touch of His hand. True meekness goes far deeper down than any attitude towards men. It lays hold on the sovereign will of God as our supreme good, and delights in absolutely and perfectly conforming itself thereto.

And then there follows, as a matter of course, that which is usually the whole significance of the word, the meekness which is displayed in our attitude towards men. The truly meek heart remains unprovoked amidst all provocation. Most men are like dogs that answer bark for bark, and only make night hideous and themselves hoarse thereby. But it is our business to meet evil with good ; and the more we are depreciated, the more we are harmed, the more we are circled about by malice and by scorn, the more patiently and persistently to love on.

Ah, brethren, it is easy to say, and hard to do thus ; but it is a plain Christian duty. Old-fashioned people believe that the sun puts out the fire. I know

not how that may be, but sure I am that the one thing that puts out the fire of antagonism and wrath and malice in those who dislike or would harm us is that we should persistently shine upon, and perchance overcome, evil with good. Provoked we remain, if we are truly meek, masters of ourselves, and calm and equable, and so are blessed in ourselves. Meekness makes no claims upon others. Plenty of people are sore all over with the irritation caused by not getting what they consider due respect. They howl and whine because they are not appreciated. Do not expect much of men. Make no demands, if for no better reason than because the more you demand the less you will get; and the less you show you think to be your due, the more likely you are to receive what you desire.

But that is a poor, shallow ground. The true exhortation is, "Be ye imitators of God, as dear children."

Ah, what a different world we should live in if the people that say, "Oh, the Sermon on the Mount is my religion," really made it their religion! How much friction would be taken out of all our lives; how all society would be revolutionised, and earth would become a Paradise!

But there is another thing to be taken into account in the description of meekness. That grace, as the example of our Lord shows, harmonises with undaunted bravery and strenuous resistance to the evil in the world. On our own personal account, there are to be no bounds to our patient acceptance of personal wrong; on the world's account, there are

to be no bounds to our militant attitude against public evils. Only let us remember, "the wrath of men worketh not the righteousness of God." If contending theologians, and angry philanthropists, and social reformers, that are ready to fly at each other's throats for the sacred cause of humanity, would only remember that there is no good to be done except in this spirit, there would be more likelihood of the errors and miseries of the world being redressed than, alas! there is to-day. Gentleness is the strongest force in the world, and the soldiers of Christ are to be priests, and to fight the battles of the Kingdom, robed, not in jingling, shining armour or with sharp swords, nor with fierce and eager bitterness of controversy, but in the meekness which overcomes. You may take all the steam-hammers that ever were forged and batter at an iceberg, and, except for the comparatively little heat that is developed by the blows and melts some small portion, it will be ice still, though pulverised instead of whole. But let it get into the silent drift of the Arctic current, and let it move quietly down to the southward, then the sunbeams smite its coldness to death, and it is dissipated in the warm ocean. Meekness is conqueror. "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."

II.—Notice whence this Christian meekness flows.

You observe the place which this Beatitude holds in the linked series of these precious sayings. It follows upon "poverty of spirit" and "mourning." And it follows, too, upon the "comfort" which the mourner is promised that he will receive. It suggests the

conduct and disposition towards God and man which follows from the inward experience described in the two former Beatitudes, which had relation only to ourselves.

The only thing that can be relied upon as an adequate cold water *douche* to the sparks of anger, resentment, retaliation, and rebellion is that we shall have passed through the previous experiences, have learned a just and lowly estimate of ourselves, have learned to come to God with penitence in our hearts, and have been raised by His gracious hand from the dust where we lay at His feet, and been welcomed to His embrace. He who thus has learned himself, and has felt repentance, and has received the comfort of forgiveness and cleansing, he, and he only, is the man who, under all provocation and in any and every circumstance, can be absolutely trusted to live in the spirit of meekness.

If I have found out anything of my own sin, if my eyes have been filled with tears and my heart with conscious unworthiness before Him, oh, then, surely I shall not kick or murmur against discipline of which the main purpose is to rid me of the evil which is slaying me; but rather I shall recognise in the sorrows that do fall upon me, in the losses and disappointments and empty places in my life and heart, one way of God's fulfilling His great promise, "From all your filthiness, and from all your idols, I will cleanse you." The man who has thus learned the purpose, the highest purpose, of sorrow, is not likely to remonstrate with God for giving Him too much of the cleansing medium.

In like manner, if we have, in any real way, received for our own the comfort which God gives to the penitent heart, we shall be easily pleased with anything that He sends. And if we have measured ourselves, not against ourselves, but against His law, and have found out how much we owe unto our Lord, it is not likely that we shall take our brother by the throat and say, "Pay me that thou owest." If any treat me badly, try to rob me, harm me, sneer at me, or turn the cold shoulder to me, who am I that I should resent that? Oh, brethren, we need, for our right relation to our fellows, a deeper conviction of our sinfulness before Him. Many of us are blessed with natural tendencies to meekness, but these are insufficient. Many of us seek to cultivate this grace from true and right, though not the deepest, motives. Let us reinforce them by that which comes from the consideration of the place which this Beatitude holds in the wreathed chain, and remember "poverty of spirit" and "mourning" must precede it.

Now, *there* is a sharp test for us Christian people. If I have learned myself, and have penitently received God's pardon, I shall be meek with God and with man. If I am not meek with God and with man, have I received God's pardon? One great reason why so many of you Christian people have so little consciousness of God's forgiving mercy, as a constant joy in your lives, is because you have so little obeyed the commandment, "Be ye imitators of God, and walk in love, as God hath forgiven and loved us."

III.—And now, lastly, note whither this meekness leads.

“They shall inherit the earth.” The words are quoted, as I have already said, from one of the psalms, and in the Psalmist’s mouth they had, I suppose, especial reference to Israel’s peaceful possession of the promised land, which in that Old Dispensation was made contingent on the people’s faithfulness. In that aspect, and looking at this Sermon on the Mount as the programme of the King Himself, what a bucket of cold water such words as these must have poured on the hot Messianic expectations of the carnal Jew! Here was a King that did not expect to win back the land by armed rebellion against the Roman legions, but said, “Be meek, and you will truly possess it, whether there is a Pilate in the procurator’s house in Cæsarea or not.”

But for us the words have a double reference, as all the promises annexed to these Beatitudes have. They apply to the present; they apply to the future. And that is no mere looseness of interpretation, eking out an insufficient verification of them here upon earth by some dim hopes of a future fulfilment, but it flows from the plain fact that the gifts which a man receives on condition of his being a true disciple are one and the same in essence, and only differ in degree, here and hereafter. Circumstances alter, no doubt, and there will be much in that heavenly state unlike that which we experience here. But the heart of the Christian beatitude is the same in this world and in the furthest reach of the shining but dim eternity beyond. And so we take

the double reference of these words to be inherent in the facts of the case, and not to be a makeshift of interpretation.

There is a present inheritance of the earth which goes, as certainly as the shadow with the sunshine, with the meekness spoken of in our text. Not literal, of course, for it is not true that this Christian grace has in it any tendency whatever to draw to itself material good of any sort. The world in outward possession belongs to the strong men, to the men of faculty, of force and push and ambition. If you want to get through a crowd, make your elbows as sharp, and your feet upon the toes of your neighbours as heavy as you can, and a road will be made for you; but, in the majority of cases, the meek man on the edge of the crowd will stop there.

Nor is it true that there would be any real blessedness, though the earth were ours in that outward sense. For you cannot measure happiness by the acre, nor does an outward condition of the most full-fed abundance, and of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice, and above the gnawings of care, ensure to any man even the shabby blessedness that the world knows, to say nothing of the solid beatitude that Christ proclaims.

So we must go deeper than that for the meaning of "inherit." Whatever are our circumstances, it is true that this calm, equable, submissive acceptance of the Divine will and obedience to it, and this loving and unresentful attitude towards men, brings with it necessarily a peacefulness of heart which gets the

highest good out of the modicum of material supplies which God's providence may send us. It used to be the old idea that gods and beatified spirits were nourished, not by the gross, material flesh of the sacrifices, but by a certain subtle aroma and essence that went up in the incense smoke. So Christ's meek men do live and thrive, and are blessed in a true possession of earthly good, even though their outward portion of it may be very small. "Better is a little that a righteous man hath than the riches of many wicked."

And, beyond that, there is a further fulfilment of this promise, upon which I venture to say but very little. It seems to me very probable that our Lord's words here fall in with what appears to be a general stream of representation throughout Scripture, to the effect that the perfected form of the Kingdom of God shall be realised in this renovated earth, when it becomes the "new earth in which dwelleth righteousness." Whether that be so or no, at all events we may fairly gather from the words the thought that in the ultimate state of assimilation and fellowship with God and Christ to which Christian people have a right to look forward, there shall be an external universe on which they may exercise their activities, and from which they may draw as yet unimagined delights.

But, at all events, dear brethren, we may be sure of this blessed thought, that they who meekly live, knowing and mourning their sin, and who meekly take to their hearts as their only hope the comfort of Christ's pardon and cleansing, who are meekly

recipient, meekly enduring, meekly obedient, shall have in their hearts, even here, a quiet fountain of peace which shall make the wilderness rejoice and blossom as the rose, and hereafter shall be crowned with the lordship of all. Meekness overcomes, "and he that overcometh shall inherit all things."



IV.

The Fourth Beatitude.

"BLESSED are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."—MATT. v. 6.



WO preliminary remarks will give us the point of view from which I desire to consider these words now. First, we have seen, in previous sermons, that these paradoxes of the Christian life which we call the Beatitudes are a linked chain, or, rather, an outgrowth from a common root. Each presupposes all the preceding. Now, of course, it is a mistake to expect uniformity in the process of building up character, and stages which are separable and successive in thought may be simultaneous and coalesce in fact. But none the less is our Lord here outlining successive stages in the growth of a true Christian life. I shall have more to say about the place in the series which this Beatitude holds, but for the present I simply ask you to remember that it has a background and set of previous experiences, out of which it springs, and that we shall not understand the depth of Christ's meaning if we isolate it from these and regard it as standing alone.

Then, another consideration is the remarkable divergence in this Beatitude from the others. The "meek," the "merciful," the "pure in heart," the "peacemakers," have all attained to certain characteristics. But this is not a benediction pronounced upon those who have attained to righteousness, but upon those who long after it. Desire, which has reached such a pitch as to be comparable to the physical craving of a hungry man for food, or to the imperious thirst of parched throats, seems a strange kind of blessedness; but it is better to long for higher—though it be unattained—good than to be content with a lower which is possessed. Better to climb, though the summit be far and the path be steep, than to browse amongst the herds in the fat valleys. Aspiration is blessedness when it is worthily directed. Let us, then, look at these two points of this Beatitude; this Divine hunger of the soul, and its satisfaction which is sure.

I.—Note, then, the hunger which is blessed.

Now "righteousness" has come to be a kind of theological term which people use without attaching any very distinct meaning to it. And it would be little improvement for "righteousness" to substitute the abstraction of—moral conformity to the will of God. Suppose we try to read the words of my text into modern English, and instead of saying, "Blessed are those that hunger and thirst after righteousness," say, Blessed are the men and women that long more than anything else to be good. Does not that sound a little more near our daily lives than the well-worn and threadbare word of my text? Righteousness is

neither more nor less than in spirit a will submitted to God, and in conduct the practice of whatsoever things are noble and lovely and of good report.

The production of such a character, the aiming after the perfection of spirit and of conduct, is the highest aim that a man can set before him. There are plenty of other hungers of the soul that are legitimate. There are many of them that are bracing and ennobling and elevating. It is impossible not to hunger for the supply of physical necessities. It is good to long for love, for wisdom. It is better to long most to be good men and women. For what are we here for? To enjoy? To work? To know? Yes! But it is not conduct, and it is still less thought, and it is least of all enjoyment, in any of its forms, which is the purpose of life, and ought to be our aim here upon earth. We are here to learn to *be*; and the cultivation and production of characters that lie parallel with the will of God is the omega of all our life in the flesh. All these other things, even the highest of them, the yearning desire

"To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the furthest bounds of human thought,"

ought to be subordinate to this further purpose of being good men and women. All these are scaffolding. The building is a character conformed to God's will and assimilated to Christ's likeness.

That commends itself as a statement of man's chief end to all reasonable and thoughtful men in their deepest and truest moments. And so, whilst we must let our desires go out on the lower levels, and seek to

draw to ourselves the various gifts that are necessary for the various phases and sides of our being, here is one that a man's own conscience tells him should stand clearly supreme and dominant, the hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Still further, notice how this desire, on which our Lord pronounces His benediction, comes in a series. I know that all men have latent, and sometimes partially and fragmentarily operative in their lives and manifest on the surface, sporadic desires after goodness. The existence of these draws the line between man and devil. And there is no soul on earth which has not sometimes felt the longing to be better than it is, to its own consciousness, to-day. But the yearning which our Lord blesses comes after, and is the result of, the previous characteristics which He has described. There must be the poverty of spirit which recognises our own insufficiency and unworthiness ; or, to put it into simpler words, we must know ourselves to be sinners. There must be the mourning which follows upon that revelation of ourselves ; the penitence which does not wash away sin, but which makes us capable of receiving forgiveness. There must be the comfort which comes from pardon received ; and there must be the yielding of ourselves to the Supreme Will, which is the true root of all meekness, in the face of antagonism from creatures and of opposition from circumstances. When thus a man's self-conceit is beaten out of him, and he knows how far he is from the possession of any real, deep righteousness of his own ; and when, further, his heart has glowed with the consciousness of forgiveness ; and

when, further, his will has bowed itself before the Father in heaven, then there will spring in his heart a hungering and thirsting, deeper far, and far more certain of fruition, than ever can be realised in another heart, a stranger to such experiences. Brethren, if we are ever to possess the righteousness which is itself blessed, it must be because we have the hunger and the thirst which are sharpened and accentuated by profound discovery of our own evil, lowly penitence before God, and glad assurance of free and full forgiveness.

Then note, still further, how that which is pronounced blessed is not the realisation of a desire, but the desire itself. And that is so, not only because, as I said, all noble aspiration is good, fulfilled or unfulfilled, and aim is of more importance than achievement, and what a man strongly wishes is often the revelation of his deepest self, and the prophecy of what he will be ; but Christ puts the *desire* for a quality here as in line with the *possession* of a number of other qualities attained, because He would hint to us that such a righteousness as shall satisfy the immortal hunger and thirst of our souls is one to be received in answer to longing, and not to be manufactured by our own efforts.

It is a gift ; and the condition of receiving the gift is to wish it honestly, earnestly, deeply, continually. The Psalmist had a glimpse of the same truth when he crowned his description of the man who was fit to ascend the hill of the Lord, and to stand in His holy place, with "he shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and *righteousness* from the God of his salvation."

Of course, in saying that the first step towards the possession of this Divinely bestowed and Divinely blessed righteousness is not effort but longing, I do not forget that the retention of it, and the working of it into our characters, and out in our conduct, is to be the result of our own diligence continually. But it is effort based on faith ; and it is mainly, as I believe, the effort to keep open the line of communication between us and God, the great Giver, which ensures our possession of this gift of God. Dear friends, the righteousness that avails for us is not our making, but God's giving, through Jesus Christ.

So, before I pass to the other thoughts of my text, may I pause here for a moment ? "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst." Think of the picture that that suggests—the ravenous desire of a starving man, the almost fierce longing of a parched throat. Is that a picture of the intensity, of the depth, of our desires to be good ? Do we professing Christian men and women long to be delivered from our evils and to be clothed in righteousness, with an honesty and an earnestness and a continuity of longing which would make such words as these of my text anything else, if applied to us, than the bitterest irony ? Oh, one looks out over the Christian Church, and one looks—which is more to the purpose—into one's own heart, and contrasts the tepid, the lazy, the occasional, and, I am afraid, the only half-sincere wishes to be better, with the unmistakable earnestness and reality of our longings to be rich, or wise, or prosperous, or famous, or happy in our domestic relationships, and the like. Alas ! alas ! that the whole current of the great river

of so many professing Christians' desires runs towards earth and creatures, and the tiniest little trickle is taken off, like a lade for a mill, from the great stream and directed towards higher things. It is hunger and thirst after righteousness that is blessed. You and I can tell whether our desires deserve such a name as that.

II.—And now, secondly, the satisfying of this Divine hunger of the soul.

“They shall be filled,” says our Lord. Now all these promises appended to the Beatitudes have a double reference—to the certainty of the present, and to the perfection of the future. That there is such a double reference may be made very obvious if we notice that the first of the promises, which includes them all, and of which the others are but aspects and phases, is cast into the present tense, whilst the remainder stand in the future. “*Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*,” not *shall be*—“they shall be comforted,” they “shall inherit the earth,” and so on. So, then, we are warranted, indeed we are obliged, to regard the great promise here as having two epochs of fulfilment—one partially here upon earth, one complete hereafter. And these two differ, not in kind, but in degree.

So then, with regard to the present, they “shall be filled.” Should not that be a gospel to the seeking spirit of man, that knows so well what it is to be crucified with the pangs of a vain desire, and to set his heart upon that which never comes into his hands? There is one region in which nothing is so impossible as that any desire should be in vain, or any wish should be unfulfilled, and it is the region

into which Christ points us in these great words of my text. Turn away from earth, where fulfilled desires and unfulfilled are equally disappointed ones. Turn away from the questionable satisfactions which come to those whose hearts go out in longing for love, wisdom, wealth, transitory felicity; and be sure of this, that the one longing which never will be disappointed, nor, when answered, will prove to have given us but ashes instead of bread, is the longing to be like God, and like Christ, and that that alone is sure to be fulfilled, and, being fulfilled, is sure to be blessed.

It is not true that all desires after righteousness are fulfilled. Those which spring up, as I have said, in men's hearts sporadically, and apart from the background of the experiences of my text, are not always, not often, even partially accomplished. There are in every land, no doubt, souls that thirst after righteousness, as they are able to discern it. And we are sure of this, that no such effort and longing passes unnoticed by Him "who hears the young ravens when they cry," and is not deaf to men who long to be good. But the experience of the bulk of us, apart from Jesus Christ, is "the things that I would not, these I do, and the things that I would, these I do not." The hunger and thirst, imperfect as they are, which are felt at intervals by all men, do not avail to break the awful continuity of their conduct as evil in the sight of God and of their own consciences. And so, just because every man knows something of the sting of this desire after righteousness, which yet remains for the most part unfulfilled, the world is full of sadness. "Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall

deliver me from the body of this death?" comes to be the expression of the noblest amongst us. Then this great Gospel comes to us, and the Nazarene stands up before a world dimly conscious of its need, and sometimes miserable because it is bad, and says: "Ho! Everyone that thirsteth come ye to the waters. . . . Come to Me, and drink."

What right had He to stand thus and say, "Every desire after goodness shall be fulfilled in Me." He had the right, because He Himself had the power and the purpose to fulfil it. For this is the very heart of His Gospel: that He will give to everyone that asks that spirit of life which was His own, that "shall make us free from the law of sin and death."

Thus, dear friends, we have to be content to take the place of recipients, and to accept, not to work out for ourselves, this righteousness for which, more or less feebly, and all of us too feebly, we do sometimes long. Oh, believe me, away from Him you will never receive into your characters the goodness that will satisfy yourselves! Siberian prisoners sometimes break their chains and escape for some distance. They are generally taken back and shut up in their captivity. If we are able, as we are in some measure, to break the bondage of evil in ourselves, we are not able to complete our emancipation by any skill, effort, or act of ours. We must be content to receive the blessing. There is no loom of earth which can weave, and no needle that man's hands can use which can stitch together, the pure garment that befits a soul. We must be content to take the robe of righteousness which Jesus Christ has wrought, and to strip off, by His help,

the ancient self, splashed with the filth of the world, and spotted by the flesh: and to "put on the new man," which Christ, and Christ alone, bestows.

For the future fulfilment of this promise—desire will live in heaven, desire will dilate the spirit, the dilated spirit will be capable of fuller gifts of God-likeness, and increased capacity will ensure increased reception. Thus, through eternity, in blessed alternation, we shall experience the desire that brings new gifts and the satisfying that produces new desires.

Dear friends, all that I have been trying to say in this sermon is gathered up into the one word, "that I may be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."



V.

The Fifth Beatitude.

"BLESSED are the merciful : for they shall obtain mercy."—

MATT. v. 7.



THE Divine simplicity of the Beatitudes covers a Divine depth, both in regard to the single precepts and to the sequence of the whole. I have already pointed out that the first of the series is to be regarded as the root and germ of all the subsequent ones. If for a moment we set it aside and consider only the fruits which are successively developed from it, we shall see that the remaining members of the sequence are arranged in pairs, of which each contains, first, a characteristic more inward and relating to the deep things of individual religion ; and, second, a characteristic which has its field of action in our relations to men. For example, the "mourners" and the "meek" are paired. Those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness" and the "merciful" are paired. "The pure in heart" and "the peacemakers" are paired.

Now that sequence can scarcely be accidental. It is the application in detail of the great principle which

our Lord endorsed in its Old Testament form when He said that the first great commandment, the love of God, had a companion consequent on and like unto it, the love of our neighbour. Religion without beneficence, and beneficence without religion, are equally maimed. The one is a root without fruit, and the other fruit without a root. The selectest emotions, the lowliest faith, the loftiest aspirations, the deepest consciousness of one's own unworthiness, the priceless elements of personal religion, are of little worth unless there are inseparably linked with them meekness, mercifulness, and peacemaking. "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." If any Christian people have neglected the service of man for the worship of God, they are flying in the face of Christ's teaching. If any antagonists of Christianity attack it on the ground that it fosters such neglect, they mistake the system that they criticise, and are judging it by the imperfect practice of the disciples instead of by the perfect precepts of the Master.

So, then, here we have a characteristic lodged in the very heart of this series of Beatitudes which refers wholly to our demeanour to one another. My remarks this morning will, therefore, be of a very homely, commonplace, and practical kind.

I.—Note the characteristic on which our Lord here pours out His blessing, Mercy.

Now, like all the other members of this sequence, with the exception, perhaps, of the last, this quality refers to disposition much rather than to action. Conduct is included, of course; but conduct only

secondarily. Jesus Christ always puts conduct second, as all wise and great teachers do. "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he." That is the keynote of all noble morality. And none has ever carried it out more thoroughly than has the morality of the Gospel. It is a poor translation and limitation of this great word which puts in the foreground merely merciful actions. The mercifulness of my text is, first and foremost, a certain habitual way of looking at and feeling towards men, especially to men in suffering and need, and most especially to men who have proved themselves bad and blameworthy. It implies that a rigid retribution would lead to severer methods of judgment and of action.

Therefore the first characteristic of the merciful man is that he is merciful in his judgments; not making the worst of people, no Devil's Advocate in his estimates of his fellows; but, endlessly, and, as the world calls it, foolishly and incredibly, gentle in his censures, and ever ready to take the charitable—which is generally the truer—construction of acts and motives. That is a very threadbare thought, brother, but the way to invest commonplace with startling power is to bring it into immediate connection with our own life and conduct. And if you will try to walk by this threadbare commonplace for a week, I am mistaken if you do not find out that it has teeth to bite and a firm grip to lay upon you. Threadbare truth is not effete until it is fulfilled. And when we try to fulfil it it ceases to be commonplace.

Again, I may remind you that this mercifulness, which is primarily an inward emotion, and a way, as I

said, of thinking of, and of looking at, unworthy people, must necessarily, of course, find its manifestation in our outward conduct. And there will be, what I need not dilate upon, a readiness to help, to give ; to forgive not only offences against society and morality but offences against ourselves.

I need not dwell longer upon this first part of my subject. I wished mainly to emphasise that to begin with action, in our understanding of mercifulness, is a mistake ; and that we must clear our hearts of antipathies, and antagonisms, and cynical suspicions, if we would inherit the blessings of our text.

Before I go further, I would point out the connection between this incumbent duty of mercifulness and the preceding virtue of meekness. It is hard enough to bear "the scorn that patient merit from the unworthy takes," without one spot of red in the cheek, one perturbation or flush of anger in the heart ; and to do that might task us all to the utmost. But that is not all that Christ's ethics require of us. It is not sufficient to exercise the passive virtue of meekness ; there must be the active one of mercifulness. And to call for that is to lay an additional weight upon our consciences, and to strain and stretch still further the obligation under which we come. We have never done what the worst men and our most malicious enemy have a right to from us when we say, with the cowardly insincerity of the world, "I can forgive, but I cannot forget." That is no forgiveness, and that is no mercifulness. It is not enough to stand still, unresisting. There must be a hand of helpfulness stretched out, and a gush of pity

and mercifulness in the heart, if we are to do what our Master has done for us all, and what our Master requires us to do for one another. Mercifulness is the active side of the passive meekness.

Further, in a word, I would note here another thing, and that is, what a sad, stern, true view of the condition of men in the world results from noticing that the only three qualities in regard of our relation to them which Christ sets in this sevenfold tiara of diamonds are meekness in the face of hatred and injustice; mercifulness in the face of weakness and wickedness; peacemaking in the face of hostility and wrangling. What a world in which we have to live, where the crowning graces are those which presuppose such vices as do these ! Ah ! dear friends, "as sheep in the midst of wolves" is true to-day. And the one conquering power is patient gentleness, and the recompense of overcoming good for all evil.

People talk a great deal, and a good deal of it very insincerely, about their admiration for these precepts gathered together in this chapter. If they would try to live them for a fortnight, they would perhaps pause a little longer than some of them do before they said, as do people that detest the theology of the New Testament, "The Sermon on the Mount is *my* religion." Is it ? It does not look very like it. At all events, if it is, it is a religion behind which practice most wofully limps.

II.—Let me ask you to look at what I have already in part referred to—the place in this series which mercifulness holds.

Now, of course, I know, and nothing that I say this

morning is to be taken for a moment as questioning or under-estimating it, that, altogether apart from religion, there is interwoven into the structure of human nature that sentiment of mercifulness which our Lord here crowns with His benediction. But it is not that natural, instinctive sentiment—which is partially unreliable, and has little power apart from the reinforcement of higher thoughts to carry itself consistently through life—that our Lord is here speaking about; but it is a mercifulness which is more than an instinct, more than a sentiment, more than the natural answer of the human heart to the sight of compassion and distress, which is, in fact, the product of all that has preceded it in this linked chain of characteristics and their blessings.

And so I ask you to recall these. “Poor in spirit,” “mourning,” “meek,” “hungering and thirsting after righteousness”—these are the springs that feed the flow of this river; and if it be not fed from them, but from the surface-waters of human sentiment and instinct, it will dry up long before it has availed to refresh barren places, and to cool thirsty lips. And note, also, “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “They shall be comforted.” “They shall inherit the earth.” “They shall be filled.” These are experiences which, again, are another collection of the head-waters of this stream.

That is to say, the true, lasting, reliable, conquering mercifulness has a double source. The consciousness of our own weakness, the sadness that creeps over the heart when it makes the discovery of its own sin, the bowed submission primarily to the will of God, and

secondarily to the antagonisms which, in subservience to that will, we may meet in life, and the yearning desire for a fuller righteousness and a more lustrous purity in our own lives and characters—these are the experiences which will make a man gentle in his judgment of his brother, and full of melting charity in all his dealings with him. If I know how dark my own nature is, how prone to uncommitted evils, how little I have to thank myself for the virtues that I have practised, which are largely due to my exemption from temptation and to my opportunities, and how little I have in my own self that I can venture to bring to the stern judgment which I am tempted to apply to other people, then the words of censure will falter on my tongue, and the bitter construction of my brother's conduct and character will be muffled in silence. "Except as to open outbreaks," said one of the very saintliest of men, "I want nothing of what Judas and Cain had." If we feel this, we shall ask ourselves, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?" and the condemnation of others will stick in our throats when we try to utter it.

And, on the other hand, if I have, through these paths of self-knowledge, and lowly estimate of self, and penitent confession of sin, and flexibility of will to God, and yearning, as for my highest good and food, after a righteousness which I feel I do not possess, come into the position in which my poverty is, by His gift, made rich, and the tears are wiped away from off my face by His gracious hand, and a full possession of large blessings bestowed on my humble will, and the righteousness for which I long imparted to me, shall I

not have learned how Divine a thing it is to give to the unworthy, and so be impelled to communicate what I have already received? "Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love as Christ also hath loved us." They only are deeply, through and through, universally and always merciful who have received mercy. The light is reflected at the same angle as it falls. And the only way by which there can come from our faces and lives a glory that shall lighten many dark hearts, and make sunshine in many a shady place, is that these hearts shall have turned full to the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance, and so "have received of the Lord that which also" they "deliver" unto men.

And so, brethren, there are two plain, practical exhortations from these thoughts. One is, let us Christian people learn the fruits of God's mercy, and be sure of this, that our own mercifulness in regard to men is an accurate thermometer of the amount of the Divine mercy which we have received.

The other is, let all of us learn the root of man's mercy to men. There is plenty, of a sort, of philanthropy and beneficent and benevolent work and feeling to-day, entirely apart from all perception of, and all faith in, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in so far as the individuals who exercise that beneficence are concerned. I, for my part, am narrow enough to believe that the streams of non-Christian charitable-ness, which run in our land and in other lands to-day, have been fed from Christ's fountain, though the supply has come underground, and bursts into light apparently unconnected with its source. If there

had been no New Testament there would have been very little of the beneficence which flouts the New Testament to-day. Historically, it is the great truths, which we conveniently summarise as being evangelical Christianity, that have been mother to the new charity that, since Christ, has been breathed over the world. I, for my part, believe that if you strike out the doctrine of universal sinfulness, if you cover over the Cross of Christ, if you do not find in it the manifestation of a God who is endlessly merciful to the most unworthy, you have destroyed the basis on which true and operative benevolence will rest. So then, dear brethren, let us all seek to get a humbler and a truer conception of what we ourselves are, and a loftier and truer faith of what God in Christ is; and then to remember that if we have these, we are bound to, and we shall, show it, by making that which is the anchor of our hope the pattern of our lives.

III.—Lastly, notice the requital, “They shall obtain mercy.”

Now, it is a wretched weakening of that great thought to suppose that it means that if A. is merciful to B., B. will be merciful to A. That is sometimes true, and sometimes it is not. It does not so very much matter whether it is true or not; that is not what Jesus Christ means. All these beatitudes are God’s gifts; and this is God’s gift too. It is His mercy which the merciful man obtains.

But you say: “Have you not just been telling us that this sense and experience of God’s mercy must precede my mercy, and now you say that my mercy must precede God’s?” No! I do not say it must

precede it; I do say that my mercifulness is, as it were, lodged between the parts of a golden circle, and has on one side the experience of the Divine mercy which quickens mine by thankfulness and imitation; on the other side, the larger experience of the Divine mercy which follows upon my walking after the example of my Lord.

This is only one case of the broad general principle "to him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath." Salvation is no such irreversible gift as that once bestowed a man can go on anyhow and it will continue; but it is given in such a fashion as that, for its retention, and still more for its increase, there must be a certain line of feeling and of action.

Our Lord does not mean to say, of course, that this one isolated member of a series carries with it the whole power of bringing down upon a man the blessings which are only due to the combination of the whole series, but that it stands as one of that linked band which shall receive the blessing from on high. And the blessing here is given in the terms of the conditions, according to that great law of retaliation which works life unto life and death unto death.

No man who, having received the mercy of God, lives harsh, hard, self-absorbed, implacable, and uncommunicative, will keep that mercy in any vivid consciousness or to any blessed issue. The servant took his fellow-servant by the throat, and said, "Pay me that thou owest," and his master said, "Deliver him to the tormentors until he pay the very uttermost

farthing." You get your salvation as a free gift; you keep it by feelings and conduct correspondent to the gift.

Whilst benevolence which has an eye to self is no benevolence, it is perfectly legitimate, and indeed absolutely necessary, that whilst the motive for mercifulness is mercy received, the encouragement to mercifulness should be mercy still to be given. "Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us." And when you think of your own unworthiness, and of the great gifts which a gracious God has given, let that impel you to move amongst men as copies of God, and be sure that you deepen your spiritual life, not only by meditation and by faith, but by practical work, and by showing towards all men mercy like the mercy which God has bestowed upon you.



VI.

The Sixth Beatitude.

"BLESSED are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."—
MATT. v. 8.



T first hearing one scarcely knows whether the character described in this great saying, or the promise held out, is the more inaccessible to men. "The pure in heart," who may they be? Is there one of us that can imagine himself possessed of a character fitting him for the vision of God, or such as to make him bear with delight that dazzling blaze? "They shall see God"; whom "no man hath seen at any time, nor can see." Surely the requirement is impossible, and the promise not less so. But does Jesus Christ mock us with demands that cannot be satisfied, and dangle before us hopes that can never be realised? There have been plenty of moralists and would-be teachers who have done that. What would be the use of saying to a man lying on a battle-field sore wounded, and with both legs shot off, "If you will only get up and run, you will be safe?" What would be the use of telling men how blessed they would be if they were the opposite of what they are? But that is not Christ's way.

These words, lofty and remote as they seem, are in truth amongst the most hopeful and radiant that ever came from even His lips. For they offer the realisation of an apparently impossible character. They promise the possession of an apparently impossible vision ; and they soothe fears, and tell us that the sight from which, were it possible, we should sometimes shrink, is the source of our purest gladness. So there are three things, it seems to me, worth our notice in these great words—How hearts can be made pure ; how the pure heart can see God ; and how the sight can be simple blessedness.

I.—How hearts can be made pure.

Now, the key which has unlocked for us, in previous sermons, the treasures of meaning in these Beatitudes is especially necessary here. For, as I have said, if you take this to be a mere isolated saying, it becomes a mockery and a pain. But if you connect it, as our Lord would have us connect it, with all the preceding links of this wretched chain describing the characteristics of a devout soul, then it assumes an altogether different appearance. "The pure in heart" are they who have exercised and received the previous qualifications and bestowments from God. That is to say, there must precede all such purity as is capable of the Divine vision, the poverty of spirit which recognises its true condition, the mourning which rightly feels the gravity and awfulness of that condition, the desire for its opposite, which will never be the "hunger and thirst" of a soul, except it is preceded by a profound sense of sin and the penitence that ensues thereupon.

But when these things have gone before, and when they have been accompanied, as they surely will be, with the results that flow from them without an interval of time—viz., enrichment with possession of the kingdom, the comforting and drying of the tears of penitence, and the possession of a righteousness bestowed because it is desired, and not won because it is worked for — then, and only then, will the heart be purged and defecated from its evils and its self-regard, and its eyes opened and couched and strengthened to behold undazzled the eternal light of God. The word of my text, standing alone, ministers despair. Regarded where Christ set it, as one of the series of characteristics which He has been describing, it kindles the brightest and surest hope.

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots ?” No ! but God can change them, and the implication of my text, regarded in its due relation to these other Beatitudes, is just that the requisite purity is not my working, but is God’s gift. The same truth which here results from the study of the place of our text in this series is condensed into a briefer, but substantially equivalent, form in the saying of another part of the New Testament, about “purifying their hearts by faith.”

Dear brethren, we come back to the old truth—all a man’s hope of and effort after reformation and self-improvement must begin with the consciousness of sin, the lament over it, the longing for the Divine good, the opening of the heart for the reception thereof ; and only then can we rise to these serene heights of purity of heart. This, and this alone, is

the way by which "a clean thing" *can* be brought "out of an unclean one," and men stained and foul with evil, and bound under the chains of that which is the mother of all evil, the undue making themselves the centres of their lives, can be washed and cleansed and emancipated; and God be made the end and the aim, the motive and the goal, the power and the reward, of all their work. Righteousness is a gift to begin with, and it is a gift bestowed on condition of "repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." We all have longings after purity, suppressed, dashed, contradicted a thousand times in our lives day by day, but there they are; and the only way by which they can be fully satisfied is when we go with our foul hands, empty as well as foul, and lift them up to God, and say, "Give what thou commandest, even the clean heart, and we shall be clean."

But then, do not let us forget, either, that this gift bestowed not once and for ever, but continuously if there be continuous desire, is to be utilised, appropriated, worked into our characters, and worked out in our lives, by our own efforts, as well as by our own faith. "Having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord." "Every man that hath this" gift bestowed, "purifieth *himself* even as He is pure." He that brings to us the gift of regeneration, by which we receive the new nature which is free from sin, calls to each of us as He presents to us the basin with the cleansing water, "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings . . . cease to do evil,

learn to do well." "What God hath joined together let not man put asunder," viz., the act of faith by which we receive, the act of diligence by which we use, the purifying power.

II.—Note how the pure heart sees God.

One is tempted to plunge into mystical depths when speaking upon such a text as this, but I wish to resist the temptation now, and to deal with it in a plain, practical fashion. Of course I need not remind you, or do more than simply remind you, that the matter in question here is no perception by sense of Him who is invisible, nor is it, either, an adequate and direct knowledge and comprehension of Him who is infinite, and whom a man can no more comprehend than he can stretch his short arms round the flaming orb of the central sun. But still, there is a relation to God possible for sinful men when they have been purified through the faith that is in Jesus Christ, which is so direct, so immediate, that it deserves the name of vision ; and which, as I believe, is the ground of a firmer certitude, and of a no less clear apprehension, than is the sense from which the name is borrowed. For the illusions of sense have no place in the sight which the pure heart has of its Father, God.

Only, remember, that here, and in the interpretation of all such Scriptural words, we have ever to be guided and governed by the great principle which our Lord laid down, under very solemn circumstances, when He said : "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." Jesus Christ, whose name from Eternity is the Word, is, from Eternity to Eternity, that which the name indicates—viz., the revealing Activity of the

Eternal God. And, as I believe, wherever there have been kindled in men's hearts, either by the contemplation of nature and providence, or by the intuitions of their own spirits, any glints or glimpses of a God, there has been the operation of "the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world." And far beyond the limits of historical Revelation within Israel, as recorded in Scripture, that Eternal Word has been unveiling, as men's dim eyes were capable of perceiving it, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. But for us who stand in the full blaze of that historical manifestation in the character and work of Jesus Christ our Saviour, our vision of God is neither more nor less than the apprehension and the realisation of Christ as "God manifest in the flesh."

Whether you call it the vision of God, or whether you call it communion with God in Jesus Christ, or whether you fall back upon the other metaphor of God dwelling in us and we dwelling in God, it all comes to the same thing, the consciousness of His presence, the realisation of His character, the blessed assurance of loving relations with Him, and the communion in mind, heart, will, and conduct, with God, who has come near to us all in Jesus Christ.

Now, I need not remind you, I suppose, that for such a realisation and active, real, communion, purity of heart is indispensable. That is no arbitrary requirement, but inherent, as we all know, in the very nature of the case. If we think of what He is, we shall feel that only the pure in heart can really pass into loving fellowship with Him. "How can two

walk together except they be agreed?" And if we reflect upon the history of our own feelings and realisation of God's presence with us, we shall see that impurity always drew a membrane over the eye of our souls, or cast a mist of invisibility over the heavens. The smallest sin hides God from us. A very, very little grain of dye stuff will darken miles of a river, and make it incapable of reflecting the blue sky and the sparkling stars. The least evil done and loved blurs and blots, if it does not eclipse, for us the doers the very Sun of Righteousness Himself. No sinful men can walk in the midst of that fiery furnace and not be consumed. "The pure in heart"—and only they—"shall see God."

Now, I need not remind you, I suppose, that in this, as in all these Beatitudes, the germinal fulfilment in the present life is not to be parted off by a great gap from the perfect fulfilment in the life which is to come. And so I do not dwell so much on the differences, great and wonderful as these must necessarily be, between the manner of apprehension and communion with God which it is reserved for heaven to bestow upon us, and the manner of those which we may enjoy here; but I rather would point to the blessed thought that in essence they are one, however in degree they may be different. No doubt, changed circumstances, new capacities, the withdrawal of time and sense, the dropping away of the veil of flesh, which is the barrier between us and the unseen order of things in which "we live and move and have our being," will induce changes and progresses in the manner and in the degree of that vision about which

it would be folly for us to speak. If there were anything here with which we could compare the state of the blessed in heaven, in so far as it differs from their state on earth, we could form some conception of these differences; but if there were anything here with which we could compare it, it would be less glorious than it is. It is well that we should have to say, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared." So let us be thankful that "it doth not yet appear what we shall be"; and let us never allow our ignorance of the manner to make us doubt or neglect the fact, seeing that we know "that when He shall appear . . . we shall see Him as He is."

III.—Lastly, notice how this sight brings blessedness.

There is nothing else that will "satisfy the eye with seeing." The vision of God, even in its incipient and imperfect form which is possible upon earth, is the one thing that will calm our distractions, that will supply our needs, that will lift our lives to a level of serene power and blessedness, impossible by any other method. Such a sight will dim all the dazzling illusions of earth, as, when the sun leaps into the heavens, the stars hide their faces and faint into invisibility. It will make us lords of ourselves, masters of the world, kings over time and sense and the universe. Everything will be different when "earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God." That is what is possible for a Christian holding fast by Jesus Christ, and in Him

having communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Brethren, I venture to say no word about the blessedness of that future. Heaven's golden gates keep their secret well. The purest joys of earth, about which poets have sung for untold centuries, after all singing need to be tasted before they are conceived of; and all our talk about the blessedness yonder is but like what a chrysalis might dream in its tomb as to the life of the radiant winged creature which it would one day become. Let us be content to be ignorant, and believe with confidence that we shall find that the vision of God is the heaven of heavens.

We shall owe that eternal vision to the Eternal Revealer; for, as I believe, Scripture teaches us that it is only in Him that the glorified saints see the Father, as it is only in Him that here on earth we have the vision of God. That sight is not, like the bodily sense to which it is compared, a far-off perception of an ungrasped brightness, but it is the actual possession of what we behold. We see God when we have God. When we have God we have enough.

But I dare not close without one other word. There is a vision of God possible to an impure heart, in which there is no blessedness. There comes a day in which "they shall call upon the rocks to fall and cover them from the face of Him that sits upon the throne." The alternative is before each of us, dear friends—either "every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him; and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him;" or, "I shall behold Thy

face in righteousness. I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness." If we cry "Create a clean heart in me, O God !" He will answer, "I will give you a new heart, and take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh, and I will pour clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean."



VII.

The Seventh Beatitude.

"BLESSED are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."—MATT. V. 9.



HIS is the last Beatitude descriptive of the character of the Christian. There follows one more, which describes his reception by the world. But this one sets the top stone, the shining apex, upon the whole Temple-structure which the previous Beatitudes had been gradually building up. You may remember that I have pointed out in previous sermons how all these various traits of the Christian life are deduced from the root of poverty of spirit. You may also remember how I have had occasion to show that if we regard that first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," as the root and mother of all the rest, the remainder are so arranged as that we have alternately a grace which regards mainly the man himself and his relations to God, and one which also includes his relations to man.

Now there are three of these which look out into the world, and these three are consummated by this one of my text. These are "the meek," which des-

cribes a man's attitude to opposition and hatred ; "the merciful," which describes his indulgence in judgment and his pitifulness in effort ; and "the peacemakers." For Christian people are not merely to bear injuries and to recompense them with pity and with love, but they are actively to try to bring about a wholesomer and purer state of humanity, and to breathe the peace of God, which passes understanding, over all the janglings and struggles of this world.

So, I think, if we give a due depth of significance to that name "peacemaker," we shall find that this grace worthily completes the whole linked series ; and is the very jewel which clasps the whole chain of Christian and Christlike characteristics.

I.—I wish then, first, to ask how Christ's peacemakers are made.

Now there are certain people whose natural disposition has in it a fine element, which diffuses soothing and concord all around them. I daresay we all have known such—perhaps some good woman, without any very shining gifts of intellect, who yet dwelt in such peace of heart herself that conflict and jangling were rebuked in her presence. And there are other people who love peace, and seek after it in the cowardly fashion of letting things alone ; whose "peace-making" has no nobler source than hatred of trouble, and a wish to let sleeping dogs lie. These, instead of being peacemakers, are warmakers, for they are laying up materials for a tremendous explosion some day.

But it is a very different thing that Jesus Christ has in view here, and I need only ask you to do again

what we have had occasion to do in the previous sermons of this series—to link this characteristic with those that go before it, of which it is regarded as being the bright and consummate flower and final outcome. No man can bring that which he does not possess. Vainly will a man whose own heart is torn by contending passions, whose own life is full of animosities and unreconciled outstanding causes of alienation and divergence between him and God, between him and duty, between him and himself, ever seek to shed any deep or real peace amongst men. He may superficially solder some external quarrels, but that is not all that Jesus Christ means. His peacemakers are created by having passed through all the previous experiences which these preceding verses bring out. They have learned the emptiness of their own spirits. They have wept tears, if not real and literal, those which are far more agonising—tears of spirit and conscience—when they have thought of their own demerits and foulnesses. They have bowed in humble submission to the will of God, and even to that will as expressed by the antagonisms of man. They have yearned after the possession of a fuller and nobler righteousness than they themselves have attained. They have learned to judge others with a gentle judgment because they know how much they need it, and to extend to others a helping hand because aware of their own impotence and need of succour. They have been led through all these, often painful, experiences into a purity of heart which has been blessed by some measure of vision of God; and, having thus been equipped and prepared, they are fit

to go out into the world and say, in the presence of all its tempests, "Peace! Be still." And something of the miracle-working energy of the Master whom they serve will be shed upon those who serve Him.

Brethren, the peacemaker who is worthy of the name must have gone through these deep spiritual experiences. I do not say that they are to come in regular stages, separable from each other. That is not the way in which a character mounts towards God—not by a flight of steps, at distinctly different elevations, but rather by an ascending slope. And, although these various Christian graces which precede that of my text are separable in thought, and are linked in the fashion that our Lord sets forth in experience, they may be, and often are, contemporaneous.

But whether separated from one another in time or not, whether this life-preparation of which the previous verses give us the outline has been realised drop by drop, or whether it has been all flooded on to the soul at once, as it quite possibly has in some fashion or other, it must precede our being the sort of peacemakers that Christ desires and blesses.

There is only one more point that I would make here before I go on, and that is, that it is well to notice that the climax of Christian character, according to Jesus Christ Himself, is found in our relations to men, and not in our relation to God. Worship of heart and spirit, devout emotions of the sacredest, sweetest, most hallowed and hallowing sort, are absolutely indispensable, as I have tried to show you. But equally, if not more, important is it for us to

remember that the purest communion with God, and the selectest emotional experiences of the Christian life, are meant to be the bases of active service ; and that, if it does not follow these, there is good reason for supposing that these are spurious, and worth very little. The service of man is the outcome of the love of God. He who begins with poverty of spirit is perfected when, forgetting himself, and coming down from the mountain-top, where the Shekinah cloud of the glory and the audible voice are, he plunges into the struggles of the multitude below, and frees the devil-ridden boy from the demon that possessed him. Begin by all means with poverty of spirit, or you will never get to this—"Blessed are the peacemakers." But see to it that poverty of spirit leads to the meekness, the mercifulness, the peace-bringing influence which Christ has pronounced blessed.

II.—What is the peace which Christ's peacemakers bring ?

This is a very favourite text with people that know very little of the depths of Christianity. They fancy that it appeals to common sense and men's natural consciences, apart altogether from minutenesses of doctrine or of Christian experience. They are very much mistaken. No doubt there is a surface of truth, but only a surface, in the application that is generally given to these words of our text, as if it meant nothing more than "He is a good man that goes about and tries to make contending people give up their quarrels, and produces a healing atmosphere of tranquillity wherever he goes." That is perfectly true, but there is a great deal more in the text than that. If we

consider the Scriptural usage of this great word "peace," and all the ground that it covers in human experience; if we remember that it enters as an element into Christ's own name, the "Peace-Bringer," the "Prince of Peace"; and if we notice, as I have already done, the place which this Beatitude occupies in the series, we shall be obliged to look for some far deeper meaning before we can understand the sweep of our Lord's intention here.

I do not think that I am going one inch too far, or forcing meanings into His words which they are not intended to bear, when I say that the first characteristic of the peace which His disciples have been passed through their apprenticeship in order to fit them to bring is the peace of reconciliation with God. The cause of all the other fightings in the world is that men's relation to the Father in heaven is disturbed, and that, whilst there flow out from Him only amity and love, these are met by us with antagonism often, with opposition of will often, with alienation of heart often, and with indifference and forgetfulness almost uniformly. So the first thing to be done to make men at peace with one another and with themselves is to rectify their relation to God, and bring peace there.

We often hear in these days complaints of Christian Churches and Christian people because they do not fling themselves with sufficient energy to please the censors into movements which are intended to bring about happier relations in society. The longest way round is sometimes the shortest way home. It does not belong to all of us Christians, and I doubt whether it belongs to the Christian Church as such at all, to

fling itself into the movements to which I have referred. But if a man go and carry the great message of a reconciled and a reconciling God manifest in Jesus Christ, and bringing peace between men and God, he will have done more to sweeten society and put an end to hostility than I think he will be likely to do by any other method. Christian men and women, whatever else you and I are here for, we are here mainly that we may preach, by lip and life, the great message that in Christ is our peace, and that God was in Christ "reconciling the world to Himself."

We are not to leave out, of course, that which is so often taken as being the sole meaning of the great word of my text. There is much that we are all bound to do to carry the tranquillising and soothing influences of Gospel principles and of Christ's example into the littlenesses of daily life. Any fool can stick a lucifer match into a haystack and make it burn. It is easy to promote strife. There is a malicious love of it in us all ; and ill-natured gossip has a great deal to do in bringing it about. But it takes something more to put the fire out than it did to light it, and there is no nobler office for Christians than to seek to damp down all these devil's flames of envy and jealousy and mutual animosity. We have to do it, first, by making very sure that we do not answer scorn with scorn, gibes with gibes, hate with hate, but "seek to overcome evil with good." It takes two to make a quarrel, and your most hostile antagonist cannot break the peace unless you help him. If you are resolved to keep it, kept it will be.

May I say another word? I think that our text, though it goes a good deal deeper, does also very plainly tell us Christian folk what is our duty in relation to literal warfare. There is no need for me to discuss here the question as to whether actual fighting with armies and swords is ever legitimate or not. It is a curious kind of Christian duty certainly, if it ever gets to be one. And when one thinks of the militarism that is crushing Europe and driving her ignorant classes to wild schemes of revolution; and when one thinks of the hell of battlefields, of the miseries of the wounded, of mourning widows, of ruined peaceful peasants, of the devil's passions that war sets loose, some of us find it extremely hard to believe that that is ever in accordance with the mind of Christ. But whether you agree with me in that or no, surely my text points to the duty of the Christian Church to take up a very much more decisive position in reference to the military spirit than, alas! it ever has done. Certainly it does seem to be not very obviously in accordance with Christ's teachings that men-of-war should be launched with a religious service, or that *Te Deums* should be sung because thousands have been killed. It certainly does seem to be something like a satire on European Christianity that one of the chief lessons we have taught the East is that we have instructed the Japanese how to use Western weapons to fight their enemies. Surely, surely, if Christian churches laid to heart as they ought these plain words of the Master, they would bring their united influence to bear against that demon of war, and that pinchbeck, spurious glory which is connected

with it. "Blessed are the peacemakers." Let us try to earn the benediction.

III.—Lastly, note the issue of this peacemaking.

"They shall be called the sons of God." Called? By whom? Christ does not say, but it should not be difficult to ascertain. It seems to me that to suppose that it is by men degrades this promise, instead of making it the climax of the whole series. Besides, it is not true that if a Christian man lives as I have been trying to describe, protesting against certain evils, trying to diffuse an atmosphere of peace round about him; and, above all, seeking to make known the Name of the great Peacemaker, men will generally call him a "son of God." The next verse but one tells us what they will call him. "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for My sake." They are a great deal more likely to have stones and rotten eggs flung at them than to be pelted with bouquets of scented roses of popular approval. No! no! it is not man's judgment that is meant here. It matters very little what men call us. It matters everything what God calls us. It is He who will call them "sons of God." So the Apostle John thought that Christ meant, for he very beautifully and touchingly quotes this passage when he says "Beloved! behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God."

God's calling is a recognition of men for what they are. God owns the man that lives in the fashion that we have been trying to outline—God owns him for His child; manifestly a son, because he has the

Father's likeness. "Be ye therefore imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love." The Peacemaker is first the name of God in Christ, and they who go about the world proclaiming His peace and making peace, bear the image of the heavenly, and are owned by God as His sons.

What does that owning mean? Well, it means a great deal which has yet to be disclosed, but it means this, too, that the whisper of the Voice which owns us for children will be heard by ourselves. The Spirit which cries "Abba, Father!" will open our ears to hear Him say, "Thou art My beloved Son." Or, to put it into plain English, there is no surer way by which we can come to the calm, happy, continual consciousness of being the children of God than by this living like Him, to spread the peace of God over all hearts.

I have said in former sermons that all these promises, which are but the natural outcome of the characteristics to which they are attached, have a double reference, being in germ here, and in maturity hereafter. Like the rest, this one has that double reference. For the consciousness, here and now, that we are the children of God is but, as it were, the morning twilight of what shall hereafter be an unsetting meridian sunshine. What depths of Divine assimilation, what mysteries of calm, peaceful, filial fellowship, what riches beyond count of Divine inheritance, lie in the name of son, the possession of these alone can tell. For the same Apostle whose comment upon these words we have already quoted goes on to say, "It doth not yet appear what we shall be."

Only we have one assurance, wide enough for all

anticipation, and firm enough for solid hope: "If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ." He must make us sons before we can be called the sons of God. He must give us peace with God, with ourselves, with men, with circumstances, before we can go forth effectually to bring peace to others. If He has given us these things, He has bound us to spread them. Let us do so. And if our peace ever is spoken in vain as regards others, it will come back to us again; and we shall be kept in perfect peace, even in the midst of strife, until we enter at last into the City of Peace and serve the King of Peace for ever.



VIII.

Teacher or Saviour?

"THE same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him."—
JOHN iii. 2.



HE connection in which the Evangelist introduces the story of Nicodemus throws great light on the aspect under which we are to regard it. He has just been saying that upon our Lord's first visit to Jerusalem at the Passover there was a considerable amount of interest excited, and a kind of imperfect faith in Him drawn out, based solely on His miracles. He adds that this faith was regarded by Christ as unreliable. And he goes on to explain that our Lord exercised great reserve in His dealings with the persons who professed it, for the reason that "He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man, for He knew what was in man."

Now, if you note that reiteration of the word "man," you will understand the description which is given of the person who is next introduced. "He knew what was in man. There was a *man* of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." It

would have been enough to have said, "There was a Pharisee." When John says "*a man* of the Pharisees" he is not merely carried away by the echo in his ears of his own last words, but it is as if he had said, "Now, here is one illustration of the sort of thing that I have been speaking about; one specimen of the imperfect faith built upon miracles; and one illustration of the way in which Jesus Christ dealt with it."

He was "*a Pharisee*." That tells us of the school to which he belonged, and the general drift of his thought. He was "*a ruler of the Jews*." That tells us that he held an official position in the supreme court of the nation, to which the Romans had left some considerable shadow of power in ecclesiastical matters. And this man comes to Christ, and acknowledges Him. Christ deals with him in a very suggestive fashion. His confession, and the way in which our Lord received it, are what I desire to consider briefly in this sermon.

I.—Note, then, first, this imperfect confession.

Everything about it, pretty nearly, is wrong. "*He came to Jesus by night*," half ashamed, and wholly afraid, of speaking out the conviction that was working in him. He was a man in position. He could not compromise himself in the eyes of his co-sanhedrists. "*It would be a grave thing for a man like me to be found in converse with this new Rabbi and apparent Prophet. I must go cautiously, and have regard to my reputation and my standing in the world; and shall steal to Him by night*."

There is something wrong with any convictions about Jesus

Christ which let themselves be huddled up in secret. The true apprehension of Him is like a fire in a man's bones, that makes him "weary of forbearing" when he locks his lips, and forces him to speak. If Christians can be dumb, there is something dreadfully wrong with their Christianity. If they do not regard Jesus Christ in such an aspect as to oblige them to stand out in the world and say, "Whatever anybody says or thinks about it, I am Christ's man," then be sure that they do not yet know Him as they ought to do. He "came to Jesus by night." And therein condemned himself.

He said, "Rabbi, we know." There is more than a *soupc̄on* of patronage in that. He is giving Jesus Christ a certificate, duly signed and sealed by Rabbinical authority. He evidently thinks that it is no small matter that he and some of his fellows should have been disposed to look with favour upon this new Teacher. And so he comes, if not patronising the young man, at all events extremely conscious of his own condescension in recognising Him. "We know."

Had he the right to speak for any of his fellows? If so, then at that very early stage of our Lord's ministry there was a conviction beginning to work in that body of ecclesiastics which casts a very lurid light on their subsequent proceedings. It was a good long while after, when Jesus Christ's attitude towards them had been a little more clearly made out than it was at the beginning, that they said officially, "As for this fellow, we know not whence He is." They "knew" when He did not seem to be trenching on their prerogatives, or driving His Ithuriel-spear through their

traditional professions of orthodoxy and punctilious casuistries. But when He trod on their toes, when he ripped up their pretensions, when He began to show his antagonism to their formalism and traditionalism, then they did not know where He came from. And there are plenty of us that are very polite to Jesus Christ as long as He does not interfere with us, and who begin to doubt His authority when He begins to rebuke our sins.

The man that said, "We know," and then proceeded to tell Christ the grounds upon which He was accepted by him, was not in the position which becomes sinful men drawing near to their Saviour. "We know that Thou art a Teacher." Contrast that, with its ring of complacency, and, if not superior, at least co-ordinate, authority, with "Jesus! Master! have mercy on me," or with "Lord! save or I perish," and you get the difference between the way in which a formalist, conceited of his knowledge, and a poor, perishing sinner, conscious of his ignorance and need, go to the Saviour.

Further, this imperfect confession was of secondary value, because it was built altogether upon miraculous evidence. Now, there has been a great deal of exaggeration about the value of the evidence of miracle. The undue elevation to which it was lifted in the apologetic literature of the last century, when it was made out almost as if there was no other proof that Jesus came from God than that he wrought miracles, has naturally led, in this generation and in the last one, to an equally exaggerated undervaluing of its worth. Jesus Christ did appeal to signs; He did also most

distinctly place faith that rested merely upon miracle as second best; when He said, for instance, "If ye believe not Me, yet believe the works." Nicodemus says, "We know that Thou art a teacher sent from God, because no man can do these miracles except God be with him." Ah! Nicodemus! did not the substance of the teaching reveal the source of the teaching even more completely than the miracles that accompanied it? Surely, if I may use an old illustration, the bell that rings in to the sermon (which is the miracles) is less conclusive as to the Divine source of the teaching than is the sermon itself. Christ Himself is His own best evidence, and His words shine in their own light, and need no signs in order to authenticate their source. The signs are there, and are precious in my eyes less as credentials of His authority than as revelations of His character and His work. They are wonders; that is much. They are proofs; as I believe. But, high above both of these characteristics, they are signs of the spiritual work that He does, and manifestations of His redeeming power. And so a faith that had no ears for the ring of the Divine voice in the words, and no eyes for the beauty and perfection of the character, was vulgar and low and unreliable, inasmuch as it could give no better reason for itself than that Jesus had wrought miracles.

I need not remind you of how noticeable it is that at this very early stage in our Lord's ministry there were a sufficient number of miracles done to be qualified by the Evangelist as "many," and to have been a very powerful factor in bringing about this real, though imperfect, faith. John has only told us

of one miracle prior to this. And the other Evangelists do not touch upon these early days of our Lord's ministry at all. So that we are to think of a whole series of works of power and supernatural grace which have found no record in these short narratives. How much more Jesus Christ was, and did, and said, than any book can ever tell ! These are but parts of His ways ; a whisper of His power. The fulness of it remains unrevealed after all revelation.

But the central deficiency of this confession lies in the altogether inadequate conception of Jesus Christ and His work which it embodies. "We know that Thou art a teacher, a miracle worker, a man sent from God, and in communion with Him." These are large recognitions, far too large for any but a select few of the sons of men. But they fall miserably beneath the grandeur, and do not even approach within sight of the central characteristic, of Christ and of His work. Nicodemus is the type of large numbers of men nowadays. All the people that have a kind of loose, superficial connection with Christianity re-echo substantially his words. They compliment Jesus Christ out of His Divinity, and out of His redeeming work, and seem to think that they are rather conferring an honour upon Christianity when they condescend to say, "We, the learned pundits of literature ; we, the arbiters of taste ; we, the guides of opinion ; we, the writers in newspapers and magazines and periodicals ; we, the leaders in social and philanthropic movements—we recognise that Thou art a teacher." Yes, brethren, and the recognition is utterly inadequate to the facts of the case, and is insult, and not recognition.

II.—Let me ask you to look now, in the next place, at the way in which Jesus Christ deals with this imperfect confession.

It was a great thing for a young Rabbi from Nazareth, that had no certificate from the authorities, to find an opening thus into the very centre of the Sanhedrim. There is nothing in life, to an ardent young soul, at the beginning of his career—especially if he feels he has a burden laid upon him, to deliver to his fellows—half so sweet as the early recognition by some man of wisdom and weight and influence, that he, too, is a messenger from God. In later years praise and acknowledgment cloy. And one might have expected some passing word from the Master that would have expressed such a feeling as that, if He had been only a young Teacher seeking for recognition. I remember that in that strange medley of beauty and absurdity, the Koran, somewhere or other, there is an outpouring of Mahomet's heart about the blessedness of his first finding a soul that would believe in him. And it is strange that Jesus Christ had no more welcome for this man than the story tells that He had. For He meets him without a word of encouragement; without a word that seemed to recognise even a growing and a groping confidence. And yet He would not quench the smoking flax. Yes! Sometimes the kindest way to deal with an imperfect conception is to show unsparsingly why it is imperfect; and sometimes the apparent repelling of a partial faith is truly the drawing to Himself by the Christ of the man, though his faith be not approved.

So, notice how our Lord meets the imperfections of this acknowledgment. He begins by pointing out what is the deepest and universal need of men. Nicodemus had said: "Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God." And Christ says: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye must be born again." What has that to do with Nicodemus' acknowledgment? Apparently nothing; really everything. For, if you will think for a moment, you will see how it meets it precisely, and forces the rabbi to deepen his conception of the Lord. The first thing that you and I want, for our participation in the Kingdom of God, is a radical out-and-out change in our whole character and nature. "Ye must be born again." Now, whatever more that means, it means, at all events, this—a thorough-going renovation and metamorphosis of a man's nature, as the deepest need that the world and all the individuals that make up the world have.

The deepest ground of that necessity lies in the fact of sin. Brother, we can only verify our Lord's assertion by honestly searching the depths of our own hearts, and looking at ourselves in the light of God. Think what is meant when we say, "He is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all." Think of that absolute purity, that, to us, awful aversion from all that is evil from all that is sinful. Think of what sort of men they must be who can see the Lord. And then look at yourself. Are we fit to pass that threshold? Are we fit to gaze into that face? Is it possible that we should have fellowship with Him? Oh, brethren, if we rightly meditate upon two facts, the holiness of

God, and our own characters, I think we shall feel that Jesus Christ has truly stated the case when He says, "Ye must be born again." Unless you and I can get ourselves radically changed, there is no heaven for us; there is no fellowship with God for us. We must stand before Him, and feel that a great gulf is fixed between us and Him.

And so when a man comes with his poor little, "Thou art a Teacher," no words are wanted in order to set in glaring light the utter inadequacy of such a conception as that. What the world wants is not a Teacher, it is a Life-giver. What men want is not to be told the truth; they know it already. What they want is not to be told their duty; they know that, too. What they want is some power that shall turn them clean round. And what each of us wants before we can see the Lord is, that, if it may be, something shall lay hold of us, and utterly change our natures, and express from our hearts the black drop that lies there tainting everything.

Now, this necessity is met in Jesus Christ. For there were two "musts" in His talk with Nicodemus, and both of them bore directly on the one purpose of deepening Nicodemus' inadequate conception of what He was and what He did. He said, "Ye must be born again," in order that the hearer, and we, might lay to heart this, that we need something more than a Teacher, even a Life-giver; and He said, "the Son of Man must be lifted up," in order that we might all know that in Him the necessity is met, and that the Son of Man who came down from heaven, and is in heaven, even whilst He is on earth, is the sole ladder

by which men can ascend into heaven and gaze upon God.

Thus it is Christ's work as Redeemer, Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, Christ's power as bringing to the world a new and holy life, and breathing it into all that trust in Him, which makes the very centre of His work. Set by the side of that this other, "Thou art a Teacher sent from God." Ah, brethren, that will not do; it will not do for you and me. We want something a great deal deeper than that. The secret of Jesus is not disclosed until we have passed into the inner shrine, where we learn that He is the Sacrifice for the world, and the Source and Fountain of a new life. I beseech you, take Christ's way of dealing with this certificate of His character given by the rabbi that did not know his own necessities, and ponder it.

Mark the underlying principle which is here—viz., if you want to understand Christ you must understand sin; and whoever thinks lightly of it will think meanly of Him. An under-estimate of the reality, the universality, the gravity of the fact of sin lands men in the superficial and wholly impotent conception, "Rabbi! Thou art a Teacher sent from God." A true knowledge of myself as a sinful man, of my need of pardon, of my need of cleansing, of my need of a new nature, which must be given from above, and cannot be evolved from within, leads me, and I pray it may lead you, to cast yourself down before Him, with no complaisant words of intellectual recognition upon your lips, but with the old cry, "Lord! be merciful to me a sinner."

III.—And now, dear friends, one last word. Notice

when and where this imperfect disciple was transformed into a courageous confessor.

We do not know what came immediately of this conversation. We only know that some considerable time after Nicodemus had not screwed himself up to the point of acknowledging out and out, like a brave man, that he was Christ's follower; but that he timidly ventured in the Sanhedrim to slip in a remonstrance ingeniously devised to conceal his own opinions, and yet to do some benefit to Christ, when he said, "Does our law judge any man before it hear him?" And, of course, the timid remonstrance was swept aside, as it deserved to be, by the ferocious antagonism of his co-sanhedrists.

But when the Cross came, and it was a great deal more dangerous to avow discipleship, he plucked up courage, or rather courage flowed into him from that Cross, and he went boldly and craved the body of Jesus, and got it, and buried it. No doubt when he looked at Jesus hanging on the Cross he remembered that night in Jerusalem when the Lord had said, "The Son of Man must be lifted up," and he remembered how He had spoken about the serpent lifted in the wilderness, and a great light blazed in upon him, which for ever ended all hesitation and timidity for him. And so he was ready to be a martyr, or anything else, for the sake of Him whom he now found to be far more than a "Teacher," even the Sacrifice by whom his stripes were healed.

Dear brethren, I bring that Cross to you now, and pray you to see there Christ's real work for us, and for the world. He has taught us, but He has done

more. He has not only spoken, He has died. He has not only shown us the path on which to walk, He has made it possible for us to walk in it. He is not merely one amongst the noble band that have guided and inspired and instructed humanity, but He stands alone—not *a* Teacher, but *the* Redeemer, “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world.”

If He is a Teacher, take His teachings, and what are they? These, that He is the Son of God; that “He came from God”; that He “went to God”; that He “gives His life a ransom for many”; that He is to be the Judge of mankind; that if we trust in Him, our sins are forgiven and our nature is renewed. Do not go picking and choosing amongst His teachings, for these which I have named are as surely His as “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you do ye even so to them,” or any other of the moral teachings which the world professes to admire. Take the whole teachings of the whole Christ, and you will confess Him to be the Redeemer of your souls, and the Life-giver by whom, and by whom alone, we enter the Kingdom of God.



IX.

A Common Mistake and Lame Excuse.

“. . . . he prophesieth of the times that are far off.”

EZEKIEL xii. 27.



UMAN nature was very much the same in the exiles that listened to Ezekiel on the banks of the Chebar and in Manchester to-day. The same neglect of God's message was grounded then on the same misapprehension of its bearings which profoundly operates in the case of many people now. Ezekiel had been proclaiming the fall of Jerusalem to the exiles whose captivity preceded it by a few years; and he was confronted by the incredulity which fancied that it had a great many facts to support it, and so it generalised God's long-suffering delay in sending the threatened punishment into a scoffing proverb which said, “The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth.” To translate it into plain English, the prophets had cried “Wolf! wolf!” so long that their alarms were disbelieved altogether.

Even the people that did not go the length of utter unbelief in the prophetic threatening took the comfortable conclusion that these threatenings had

reference to a future date, and they need not trouble themselves about them. And so they said, according to my text, "They of the house of Israel say, The vision that he sees is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times that are far off." "It may be all quite true, but it lies away in the distant future there; and things will last our time, so we do not need to bother ourselves about what he says."

So the imagined distance of fulfilment turned the edge of the plainest denunciations, and was like wool stuffed in the people's ears to deaden the reverberations of the thunder.

I wonder if there is anybody here now whom that fits, who meets the preaching of the Gospel with a shrug, and with this saying, "He prophesies of the times that are far off." I fancy there are a few; and I wish to say a word or two about this ground on which the widespread disregard of the Divine message is based.

I.—First, then, notice that the saying of my text—in the application which I now seek to make of it—is a truth, but it is only half a truth.

Of course, Ezekiel was speaking simply about the destruction of Jerusalem. If it had been true, as his hearers assumed, that that was not going to happen for a good many years yet, the chances were that it had no bearing upon them, and they were right enough in neglecting the teaching. And, of course, when I apply such a word as this in the direction in which I wish to do now, we do bring in a different set of thoughts; but the main idea remains the same. The neglect of God's solemn message by a

great many people is based, more or less consciously, upon the notion that the message of Christianity—or, if you like to call it so, of the Gospel; or, if you like to call it more vaguely, religion—has to do mainly with blessings and woes beyond the grave, and that there is plenty of time to attend to it when we get nearer the end.

Now is it true that “he prophesies of times that are far off”? Yes! and No! Yes! it is true, and it is the great glory of Christianity that it shifts the centre of gravity, so to speak, from this poor, transient, contemptible present, and sets it away out yonder in an august and infinite future. It brings to us not only knowledge of the future, but certitude, and takes the conception of another life out of the region of perhapses, possibilities, dreads, or hopes, as the case may be, and sets it in the sunlight of certainty. There is no more mist. Other faiths, even when they have risen to the height of some contemplation of a future, have always seen it wrapped in nebulous clouds of possibilities, but Christianity sets it clear, definite, solid, as certain as yesterday, as certain as to-day.

It not only gives us the knowledge and the certitude of the times that are afar off, and that are not times but eternities, but it gives us, as the all-important element in that future, that its ruling characteristic is retribution. It “brings life and immortality to light,” and just because it does, it brings the dark orb which, like some of the double stars in the heavens, is knit to the radiant sphere by a necessary band. It brings to light, with life and immortality, death and woe. It is true—“he prophesies

of times that are far off," and it is the glory of the Gospel of Christ's revelation, and of the religion that is based thereon, that its centre is beyond the grave, and that its eye is so often turned to the clearly discerned facts that lie there.

But is that all that we have to say about Christianity? Many representations of it, I am free to confess, from pulpits and books and elsewhere, do talk as if that *was* all, as if it was a magnificent thing to have when you came to die. As the play has it, "I said to him that I hoped there was no need that he should think about God yet," because he was not going to die. But I urge you to remember, dear brethren, that all that prophesying of times that are far off has the closest bearing upon this transient, throbbing moment, because, for one thing, one solemn part of the Christian revelation about the future is that Time is the parent of Eternity, and that, in like manner as in our earthly course "the child is father of the man," so the man as he has made himself is the author of himself as he will be through the infinite spaces that lie beyond the grave. Therefore, when a Christian preacher prophesies of times that are afar off, he is prophesying of present time, between which and the most distant eternity there is an iron nexus—a band which cannot be broken.

Nor is that all. Not only is the truth in my text but a half truth, if it is supposed that the main business of the Gospel is to talk to us about heaven and hell, and not about the earth on which we secure and procure the one or the other; but also it is a half

truth because, large and transcendent, eternal in their duration, and blessed beyond all thought in their sweetness as are the possibilities, the certainties that are opened by the risen and ascended Christ, and tremendous beyond all words that men can speak as are the alternative possibilities, yet these are not all the contents of the Gospel message; but those blessings and penalties, joys and miseries, exaltations and degradations, which attend upon righteousness and sin, godliness and irreligion to-day are a large part of its theme and of its effects. Therefore, whilst on the one hand it is true, blessed be Christ's name! that "he prophesies of times that are far off"; on the other hand it is an altogether inadequate description of the Gospel message and of the Christian body of truth to say that the future is its realm, and not the present.

II.—So, then, in the second place, my text gives a very good reason for prizing and attending to the prophecy.

If it is true that God, speaking through the facts of Christ's death and Resurrection and Ascension, has given to us the sure and certain hope of immortality, and has declared to us plainly the conditions upon which that immortality may be ours, and the woful loss and eclipse into the shadow of which we shall stumble darkling if it is not ours, then surely that is a reason for prizing and laying to heart, and living by the revelation so mercifully made. People do not usually kick over their telescopes, and neglect to look through them, because they are so powerful that they show them the craters in the moon and turn faint

specks into blazing suns. People do not usually neglect a word of warning or guidance in reference to the ordering of their earthly lives because it is so comprehensive, and covers so large a ground, and is so certain and absolutely true. Surely there can be no greater sign of Divine loving-kindness, of a Saviour's tenderness and care for us, than that He should come to each of us, as He does come, and say to each of us, "Thou art to live for ever; and if thou wilt take Me for thy light, thou shalt live for ever, blessed, calm, and pure." And we listen, and say, "He prophesies of times that are far off." Oh! is that not rather a reason for coming very close to, and for grappling to our hearts and living always by the power of, that great revelation? Surely to announce the consequences of evil, and to announce them so long beforehand that there is plenty of time to avoid them and to falsify the prediction, is the token of love.

Now I wish to lay it on the hearts of you people who call yourselves Christians, and who are so in some imperfect degree, whether we do at all adequately regard, remember, and live by this great mercy of God, that He *should* have prophesied to us "of the times that are far off." Perhaps I am wrong, but I cannot help feeling that, for this generation, the glories of the future rest with God have been somewhat paled, and the terrors of the future unrest away from God have been somewhat lightened. I hope I am wrong, but I do not think that the modern average Christian thinks as much about heaven as his father did. And I believe

that his religion has lost something of its buoyancy, of its power, of its restraining and stimulating energy, because, from a variety of reasons, the bias of this generation is rather to dwell upon, and to realise, the present social blessings of Christianity than to project itself into that august future. The reaction may be good. I have no doubt it was needed, but I think it has gone rather too far. And I would beseech Christian men and women to try and deserve more the sarcasm that is flung at us that we live for another world. Would God it were true—truer than it is! We should see better work done in this world if it were. So I say, that “he prophesieth of times that are far off” is a good reason for prizing and obeying the prophet.

III.—Lastly, this is a very common and a very bad reason for neglecting the prophecy.

It does operate as a reason for giving little heed to the prophet, as I have been saying. In the old men-of-war, when an engagement was impending, they used to bring up the hammocks from the bunks and pile them into the nettings at the side of the ship, to defend it from boarders and bullets. And then, after these had served their purpose of repelling, they were taken down again and the crew went to sleep upon them. That is exactly what some of my friends do with that misconception of the genius of Christianity which supposes that it is concerned mainly with another world. They put it up as a screen between them and God, between them and what they know to be their duty—viz., the acceptance of Christ as their Saviour. It is their hammock that they put

between the bullets and themselves ; and many a good sleep they get upon it !

Now, that strange capacity that men have of ignoring a certain future is seen at work all round about us in every region of life. I wonder how many young men there are in Manchester to-day that have begun to put their foot upon the wrong road, and who know just as well as I do that the end of it is disease, blasted reputation, ruined prospects, perhaps an early death. Why ! there is not a drunkard in the city that does not know that. Every man that takes opium knows it. Every unclean, unchaste liver knows it ; and yet he can hide the thought from himself, and go straight on as if there was nothing at all of the sort within the horizon of possibility. It is one of the most marvellous things that men have that power ; only beaten by the marvel that, having it, they should be such fools as to choose to exercise it. The peasants on the slopes of Vesuvius live very careless lives, and they have their little vineyards and their olives. Yes, and every morning when they come out, they can look up and see the thin wreath of smoke going up in the dazzling blue, and they know that some time or other there will be a roar and a rush, and down will come the lava. But "a short life and a merry one" is the creed of a good many of us, though we do not like to confess it. Some of you will remember the strange way in which ordinary habits survived in prisons in the dreadful times of the French Revolution, and how ladies and gentlemen, who were going to have their heads chopped off next morning, danced and flirted, and sat at entertainments, just as if there was

no such thing in the world as the public prosecutor and the tumbril, and the gaoler going about with a bit of chalk to mark each door where the condemned were for next day.

That same strange power of ignoring a known future, which works so widely and so disastrously round about us, is especially manifested in regard to religion. The great bulk of English men and women who are not Christians, and the little sample of such that I have in my audience now, as a rule believe as fully as we do the truths which they agree to neglect. Let me speak to them individually. You believe that death will introduce you into a world of two halves—that if you have been a good, religious man, you will dwell in blessedness; that if you have not, you will not—yet you never did a single thing, nor refrained from a single thing, because of that belief. And when I, and men of my profession, come and plead with you and try to get through that strange web of insensibility that you have spun round you, you listen, and then you say, with a shrug, "He prophesies of things that are far off," and you turn with relief to the trivialities of the day. Need I ask you whether that is a wise thing or not?

Surely it is not wise for a man to ignore a future that is certain simply because it is distant. So long as it is certain, what, in the name of common sense, has the time when it begins to be a present to do with our wisdom in regard to it? It is the uncertainty in future anticipations which makes it unwise to regulate life largely by them, and if you can eliminate that element of uncertainty—which you can do if you

believe in Jesus Christ—then the question is not when is the prophecy going to be fulfilled, but is it true and trustworthy? The man is a fool who, because it is far off, thinks he can neglect it.

Surely it is not wise to ignore a future which is so incomparably greater than this present, and which also is so connected with this present as that life here is only intelligible as the vestibule and preparation for that great world beyond.

Surely it is not wise to ignore a future because you fancy it is far away, when it may burst upon you at any time. These exiles to whom Ezekiel spoke hugged themselves in the idea that his words were not to be fulfilled for many days to come; but they were mistaken, and the crash of the fall of Jerusalem stunned them before many months had passed by. We have to look forward to a future which must be very near to some of us, which may be nearer to others than they think, which at the remotest is but a little way from us, and which must come to us all. Oh, dear friends, surely it is not wise to ignore as far off that which for some of us may be here before this day closes, which will probably be ours in some cases before the fresh young leaves now upon the trees have dropped yellow in the autumn frosts, which at the most distant must be very near us, and which waits for us all.

What would you think of the crew and passengers of some ship lying in harbour, waiting for its sailing orders, who had got leave on shore, and did not know but that at any moment the blue-peter might be flying at the fore—the signal to weigh anchor—if they

behaved themselves in the port as if they were never going to embark, and made no preparations for the voyage? Let me beseech you to rid yourselves of that most unreasonable of all reasons for neglecting the Gospel, that its most solemn revelations refer to the eternity beyond the grave.

There are many proofs that man on the whole is a very foolish creature, but there is not one more tragical than the fact that believing, as many of you do, that "the wages of sin is death, and the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ," you stand aloof from accepting the gift, and risk the death.

The "times far off" have long since come near enough to those scoffers. The most distant future will be present to you before you are ready for it, unless you accept Jesus Christ as your All, for time and for eternity. If you do, the time that is near will be pure and calm, and the times that are far off will be radiant with unfading bliss.



X.

Going Out and Going In.

"AN entrance . . . my decease."—2 PETER i. 11, 15.



DO not like, and do not often indulge in, the practice of taking fragments of Scripture for a text, but I venture to isolate these two words, because they correspond to one another, and when thus isolated and connected, bring out very prominently two aspects of one thing. In the original the correspondence is even closer, for the words, literally rendered, are "a going in" and "a going out." The same event is looked at from two sides. On the one it is a departure; on the other it is an arrival. That event, I need not say, is Death.

I note, further, that the expression rendered "my decease" employs the word which is always used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to express the departure of the Children of Israel from bondage, and which gives its name, in our language, to the Second Book of the Pentateuch. "My exodus"—associations suggested by the word can scarcely fail to have been in the writer's mind.

Further, I note that this expression for Death is

only employed once again in the New Testament—viz., in St. Luke's account of the Transfiguration, where Moses and Elias spake with Jesus "concerning His decease—the exodus—which He should accomplish at Jerusalem." If you look on to the verses which follow the second of my texts you will see that the Apostle immediately passes on to speak about that Transfiguration, and about the voice which He heard then, in the holy mount. So that I think we must suppose that in the words of our second text he was already beginning to think about the Transfiguration, and was feeling that, somehow or other, his "exodus" was to be conformed to his Master's.

Now, bearing all these points in mind, let us just turn to these words and try to gather the lessons which they suggest.

I.—The first of them is this, the double Christian aspect of death.

It is well worth noting that the New Testament very seldom condescends to use that name for the mere physical fact of dissolution. It reserves it for the most part for something a great deal more dreadful than the separation of body and soul, and uses all manner of periphrases, or what rhetoricians call euphemising, that is, gentle expressions which put the best face upon a thing instead of the ugly word itself. It speaks, for instance, as you may remember, in the context here, about the "putting off" of a tent or "a tabernacle," blending the notions of stripping off a garment, and pulling down a transitory abode. It speaks about death as a sleep, and in that and other

ways sets it forth in gracious and gentle aspects, and veils the deformity, and loves and hopes away the dreadfulness, of it.

Now other languages and other religions besides Christianity have done the same things, and Roman and Greek poets and monuments have in like manner avoided the grim, plain word—death, but they have done it for exactly the opposite reason from that for which the Christian does it. They did it because the thing was so dark and dismal, and because they knew so little and feared so much about it. And Christianity does it for exactly the opposite reason, because it fears it not at all, and knows it quite enough. So it toys with leviathan, and “lays its hand on the cockatrice den,” and my text is an instance of this.

“My decease . . . an entrance.” So the terribleness and mystery dwindled down into this—a change of position; or if locality is scarcely the right class of ideas to apply to spirits detached from the body—a change of condition. That is all.

We do not need to insist upon the notion of change of place. For, as I say, we get into a fog when we try to associate place with pure spiritual existence. But the root of the conviction which is expressed in both these phrases, and most vividly by their juxtaposition, is this, that what happens at death is not the extinction, but the withdrawal, of a person, and that the man *is*, as fully, as truly as he was, though all the relations in which he stands may be altered.

Now, no materialistic teaching has any right to come in and bar that clear faith and firm conclusion. For

by its very saying that it knows nothing about life except in connection with organisation, it acknowledges that there is a difference between them. And until science can tell me how it is that the throb of a brain, or the quiver of a nerve, becomes transformed into morality, into emotion, I maintain that it knows far too little of personality and of life to be a valid authority when it asserts that the destruction of the organisation is the end of the man. I feel myself perfectly free—in the darkness in which, after all investigation, that mysterious transformation of the physical into the moral and the spiritual lies—I feel perfectly free to listen to another voice, the voice which tells me that life can subsist, and that personal being can be as full—ay, fuller—apart altogether from the material frame which here, and by our present experience, is its necessary instrument. And though accepting all that physical investigation can teach us, we can still maintain that its light does not illumine the central obscurity; and that, after all, it still remains true that round about the being of each man, as round about the being of God, clouds and darkness roll,

"Life and thought have gone away,
Side by side,
Leaving door and window wide."

That, and nothing more, is death—"My decease . . . an entrance."

Then, again, the combination of these two words suggests to us that the one act, in the same moment, is both departure and arrival. There is not a pin-

point of space, not the millionth part of a second of time, intervening between the two. There is no long journey to be taken. A man in straits, and all but desperation, is recorded in the old Book to have said: "There is but a step between me and death." Ah, there is but a step between death and the Kingdom; and he that passes out at the same moment passes in.

I need not say a word about theories which seem to me to have no basis at all in our only source of information, which is Revelation; theories which would interpose a long period of unconsciousness—though to the man unconscious it be no period at all—between the act of departure and that of entrance. Not so do I read the teaching of Scripture: "This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise." We pass out, and, as those in the vestibule of a presence-chamber have but to lift the curtain and find themselves face to face with the King, so we, at one and the same moment, depart and arrive.

Friends stands round the bed, and before they can tell by the undimmed mirror that the last breath has been drawn, the saint is "with Christ, which is far better." To depart *is* to be with Him. There is a moment in the life of every believing soul in which there strangely mingle the lights of earth and the lights of heaven. As you see in dissolving views, the one fades and the other consolidates. Like the mighty Angel in the Apocalypse, the dying man stands for a moment with one foot on the earth, and the other already laved and cleansed by the waters of that sea of glass mingled with fire which

before the Throne, "Absent from the body; present with the Lord."

Further, these two words suggest that the same act is emancipation from bondage and entrance into royalty.

"My exodus." Israel came out of Egyptian servitude, and dropped chains from wrists, and left task-masters cracking their useless whips behind them, and the brick kilns and the weary work were all done with when they went forth. Ah, brethren, whatever beauty and good and power and blessedness there may be in this mortal life, there are deep and sad senses in which, for all of us, it is a prison-house and a state of captivity. There is a bondage of flesh; there is a dominion of the animal nature; there are limitations, like high walls, cribbing, cabining, confining us—the limitations of circumstance. There is the slavery of dependence upon this poor, external, and material world. There are the tyranny of sin and the subjugation of the nobler nature to base and low and transient needs. All these fetters, and the scars of them, drop away. Joseph comes out of prison to a throne. The kingdom is not merely one in which the redeemed man is a subject, but one in which he himself is a prince. "Have thou authority over ten cities." These are the Christian aspects of death.

II.—Now, note, secondly, the great fact on which this view of death builds itself.

I have already remarked that in one of my texts the Apostle seems to be thinking about Jesus Christ and His decease. The context also refers to another

incident in his own life, when our Lord foretold to him that the putting off his tabernacle was to be "sudden," and added: "Follow thou Me."

Taking these allusions into account they suggest that it is the death of Jesus Christ—and that which is inseparable from it, His Resurrection—that changes for a soul believing on Him the whole aspect of that last experience that awaits us all. It is His exodus that makes "my exodus" a deliverance from captivity and an entrance upon royalty.

I need not remind you, how, after all is said and done, we are sure of life eternal, because Jesus Christ died and rose again. I do not need to deprecate other imperfect arguments which seem to point in that direction, such as the instincts of men's natures, the craving for some retribution beyond, the impossibility of believing that life is extinguished by the fact of physical death. But whilst I admit that a good deal may be said, and strong probabilities may be alleged, it seems to me that however much you may argue, no words, no considerations, moral or intellectual, can suffice to establish more than that it would be a very good thing if there were a future life and a probable one that there is. But Jesus Christ comes to us and says, "Touch Me, handle Me; a spirit hath not flesh and bones as I have. Here I am. I *was* dead; I *am* alive for evermore." So then *one* life, that we know about, *has* persisted undiminished, apart from the physical frame, and that one Man has gone down into the dark abyss, and has come up the same as when He descended. So it is His exodus—and, as I believe,

His death and Resurrection alone—on which the faith in immortality impregnably rests.

But that is not the main point which the text suggests. Let me remind you how utterly the whole aspect of any difficulty, trial, or sorrow, and especially of that culmination of all men's fears—death itself—is altered when we think that in the darkest bend of the dark road we may trace footsteps, not without marks of blood in them, of Him that has trodden it all before us. "Follow thou Me," He said to Peter; and it should be no hard thing for us, if we love Him, to tread where He trod. It should be no lonely road for us to walk, however the closest clinging hands may be untwined from our grasp, and the most utter solitude of which a human soul is capable may be realised, when we remember that Jesus Christ has walked it before us.

The entrance, too, is made possible because He has preceded us. "I go to prepare a place for you." So we may be sure that when we go through those dark gates and across the wild, the other side of which no man knows, it is not to step out of "the warm precincts of the cheerful day" into some dim, cold, sad land, but it is to enter into His presence.

Israel's exodus was headed by a mummy case, in which the dead bones of their whilom leader were contained. Our exodus is headed by the Prince of Life, who was dead and is alive for evermore.

So, brethren, I beseech you, treasure these thoughts more than you do. Turn to Jesus Christ and His resurrection from the dead more than you do. I may be mistaken, but it seems to me that the

Christianity of this day is largely losing the habitual contemplation of immortality which gave so much of its strength to the religion of past generations. We are all so busy in setting forth and enforcing the blessings of Christianity in its effects in the present life that, I fear me, we are largely forgetting what it does for us at the end, and beyond the end. And I would that we all thought more of our exodus and of our entrance in the light of Christ's death and resurrection. Such contemplation will not unfit us for any duty or any enjoyment. It will lift us above the absorbed occupation with present trivialities, which is the bane of all that is good and noble. It will teach us "a solemn scorn of ills." It will set on the furthest horizon a great light instead of a doleful darkness, and it will deliver us from the dread of that "shadow feared of man," but not by those who, listening to Jesus Christ, have been taught that to depart is to be with Him.

III.—Now, I meant to have said a word, in the close of my sermon, about a third point—viz., the way of securing that this aspect of death shall be our experience, but your time will not allow of my dwelling upon that as I should have wished. I would only point out that, as I have already suggested, this context teaches us that it is His death that must make our deaths what they may become; and would ask you to notice, further, that the context carries us back to the preceding verses. "An entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly." We have just before read, "If these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the

knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"; and just before is the exhortation, "giving all diligence, minister to your faith virtue."

So the Apostle, by reiterating the two words which he had previously been using, teaches us that if death is to be to us that departure from bondage and entrance into the Kingdom, we must, here and now, bring forth the fruits of faith. There is no entrance hereafter, unless there has been a habitual entering into the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus Christ even whilst we are on earth. There is no entrance by reason of the fact of death, unless all through life there has been an entrance into rest by reason of the fact of faith.

And so, dear brethren, I beseech you to remember that it depends on yourself whether departing shall be arrival, and exodus shall be entrance. One thing or other that last moment must be to us all—either a dragging us reluctant away from what we would fain cleave to, or a glad departure from a foreign land and entrance to our home. It may be as when Peter was let out of prison, the angel touched him, and the chains fell from his hands, and the iron gate opened of its own accord, and he found himself in the city. It is for you to settle which of the two it shall be. And if you will take Him for your King, Companion, Saviour, Enlightener, Life here, "the Lord shall bless your going out and coming in from this time forth and even for evermore."

XI.

Slaves and free.

"HE that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman ; likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant."—
1 COR. vii. 22.



HIS remarkable saying occurs in a remarkable connection, and is used for a remarkable purpose. The Apostle has been laying down the principle that the effect of true Christianity is greatly to diminish the importance of outward circumstance. And on that principle he bases an advice, dead in the teeth of all the maxims recognised by worldly prudence. He says, in effect, "Mind very little about getting on and getting up. Do God's will wherever you are, and let the rest take care of itself." Now, the world says, "Struggle, wriggle, fight, do anything to better yourself." Paul says, "You will better yourself by getting nearer God, and if you secure that—art thou a slave ? care not for it ; if thou mayest be free, use it rather. Art thou bound to a wife ? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed ? seek not to be bound. Art thou circumcised ? seek not to be uncircumcised. Art thou a Gentile ? seek not to become in outward form a Jew."

Never mind about externals: the main thing is our relation to Jesus Christ, because in that there is what will be compensation for all the disadvantages of any disadvantageous circumstances, and in that there is what will take the gilt off the gingerbread of any superficial and fleeting good, and will bring a deep-seated and permanent blessing.

Now, I am not going to deal in this sermon with that general principle, nor even to be drawn aside to speak of the tone in which the Apostle here treats the great abomination of slavery, and the singular advice that he gives to its victims; though the consideration of the tone of Christianity to that master-evil of the old world might yield a great many thoughts very relevant to pressing questions of to-day. But my one object is to fix upon the combination which he here brings out in regard to the essence of the Christian life; how that in itself it contains both members of the antithesis, servitude and freedom; so that the Christian man who is free externally is Christ's slave, and the Christian man who is outwardly in bondage is emancipated by his union with Jesus Christ.

There are two thoughts here, the application in diverse directions of the same central idea—viz., the slavery of Christ's free men, and the freedom of Christ's slaves. And I deal briefly with these two now.

I.—First, then, note how, according to the one-half of the antithesis, Christ's freed men are slaves.

Now, the way in which the New Testament deals with that awful wickedness of a man held in bondage

by a man is extremely remarkable. It might seem as if such a hideous piece of immorality were altogether incapable of yielding any lessons of good. But the Apostles have no hesitation whatever in taking slavery as a clear picture of the relation in which all Christian people stand to Jesus Christ their Lord. He is the owner and we are the slaves. For you must remember that the word most inadequately rendered here, "servant" does not mean "a hired man" who has, of his own volition, given himself for a time to do specific work, and get wages for it; but it means "a bond-slave," a chattel owned by another. All the ugly associations which gather round the word are transported bodily into the Christian region, and there, instead of being hideous, take on a shape of beauty, and become expressions of the deepest and most blessed truths, in reference to Christian men's dependence upon, and submission to, and place in the household and the heart of, Jesus Christ, their owner.

And what is the centre idea that lies in this metaphor, if you like to call it so? It is this: absolute authority, which has for its correlative—for the thing in us that answers to it—unconditional submission. Jesus Christ has the perfect right to command each of us, and we are bound to bow ourselves, unreluctant, unmurmuring, unhesitating, with complete submission at His feet. His authority, and our submission, go far, far deeper than the most despotic sway of the most tyrannous master, or than the most abject submission of the most downtrodden slave. For no man can coerce another man's will, and no man can require more, or can ever get more, than the outward

obedience, which may be rendered with the most sullen and fixed rebellion of a hating heart and an obstinate will. But Jesus Christ demands that if we call ourselves Christians we shall bring, not our members only as instruments to Him, in outward surrender and service, but that we shall yield ourselves, with our capacities of willing and desiring, utterly, absolutely, constantly to Him.

The founder of the Jesuits laid it down as a rule for his Order that each member of it was to be in the master's hand like a corpse, or a staff in the hand of a blind man. That was horrible. But the absolute laying of myself at the disposal of another's will, which is expressed so tyrannously in these figures, is the simple duty of every Christian, and as long as we have recalcitrating wills, which recoil at anything which Christ commands or appoints, that perk up their own inclinations in the face of His solemn commandment, or that shrink from doing and suffering whatsoever He imposes and enjoins, we have still to learn what it means to be Christ's disciples.

Dear brethren, absolute submission is not all that makes a disciple, but, depend upon it, there is no discipleship worth calling by the name without it. So I come to each of you with His message to you:—Down on your faces before Him! Bow your obstinate wills, surrender yourselves and accept Him as absolute, dominant Lord over your whole being! Are you Christians after that pattern? Being freemen, are you Christ's slaves?

It does not matter what sort of work the owner

sets his household of slaves to do. One man is picked out to be his pipe-bearer, or his shoe-cleaner; and, if the master is a sovereign, another one is sent off, perhaps, to be governor of a province, or one of his council. They are all slaves; and the service that each does is equally important. "All service ranks the same with God. There is no last nor first." What does it matter what you and I are set to do? Nothing! And, so, why need we struggle and wear our hearts out to get into conspicuous places, or to do work that shall bring some revenue of praise and glory to ourselves? "Play well thy part; there all the honour lies," the world can say. Serve Christ in anything, and all are alike in His sight.

The slave-owner had absolute power of life and death over his dependents. He could split up families; he could sell away dear ones; he could part husband and wife, parent and child. The slave was his, and he could do what he liked with his own, according to the cruel logic of ancient law. And Jesus Christ, the Lord of the household, the Lord of providence, can say to this one, "Go!" and he goes into the mists and the shadows of death. And He can say to those that are most closely united, "Loose your hands! I have need of one of you yonder. I have need of the other one here." And if we are wise, if we are His servants in any real deep sense, we shall not kick against the appointments of His supreme, autocratic, and yet most loving Providence, but be content to leave the arbitrament of life and death, of love united or of love parted, in His hands, and say, "Whether we live we are the

Lord's, or whether we die we are the Lord's; living or dying we are His."

The slave-owner owned all that the slave owned. He gave him a little cottage, with some humble sticks of furniture in it; and a bit of ground on which to grow his vegetables for his family. But he to whom the owner of the vegetables and the stools belonged owned them too. And if we are Christ's servants, our banker's book is Christ's, and our purse is Christ's, and our investments are Christ's; and our mills, and our warehouses, and our shops, and our businesses are His. We are not His slaves if we arrogate to ourselves the right of doing what we like with His possessions.

And, then, still further, there comes into our Apostle's picture here yet another point of resemblance between slaves and the disciples of Jesus. For the hideous abominations of the slave-market are transferred to the Christian relation, and defecated and cleansed of all their abominations and cruelty thereby. For what follows my text immediately is, "Ye are bought with a price." Jesus Christ has won us for Himself. There is only one price that can buy a heart, and that is a heart. There is only one way of getting a man to be mine, and that is by giving myself to be his. So we come to the very vital, palpitating centre of all Christianity when we say, "He gave Himself for us, that He might acquire to Himself a people for His possession." Thus His purchase of His slave, when we remember that it is the buying of a man in his inmost personality, changes all that might seem harsh in the requirement of

absolute submission into the most gracious and blessed privilege. For when I am won by another, because that other has given him or her whole self to me, then the language of love is submission, and the conformity of the two wills is the delight of the loving will. Whoever has truly been wooed into relationship with Jesus, by reflection upon the love with which Jesus grapples him to His heart, finds that there is nothing so blessed as to yield one's self utterly and for ever to His service.

The one bright point in the hideous institution of slavery was that it bound the master to provide for the slave, and though that was degrading to the inferior, it made his life a careless, child-like, merry life, even amidst the many cruelties and abominations of the system. But what was a good, dashed with a great deal of evil, in that relation of man to man, comes to be a pure blessing and good in our relation to Him. If I am Christ's slave, it is His business to take care of His own property, and I do not need to trouble myself much about it. If I am His slave, He will be quite sure to find me in food and necessaries enough to get His tale of work out of me; and I may cast all my care upon Him, for He careth for me. So, brethren, absolute submission and the devolution of all anxiety on the Master are what is laid upon us, if we are Christ's slaves.

II.—Then there is the other side, about which I must say, secondly, a word or two; and that is, the freedom of Christ's slaves.

As the text puts it, he that is called, being a servant, is the Lord's freedman. A freedman was one who was

emancipated, and who therefore stood in a relation of gratitude to his emancipator and patron. So in the very word "freedman" there is contained the idea of submission to Him who has struck off the fetters.

But, apart from that, let me just remind you, in a sentence or two, that whilst there are many other ways by which men have sought, and have partially attained, deliverance from the many fetters and bondages that attach to our earthly life, the one perfect way by which a man can be truly, in the deepest sense of the word and in his inmost being, a free man is by faith in Jesus Christ.

I do not for a moment forget how wisdom and truth, and noble aims and high purposes, and culture of various kinds have, in lower degrees and partially, emancipated men from self and flesh and sin and the world, and all the other fetters that bind us. But sure I am that the process is never so completely and so assuredly effected as by the simple way of absolute submission to Jesus Christ, taking Him for the supreme and unconditional Arbiter and Sovereign of a life.

If we do that, brethren, if we really yield ourselves to Him, in heart and will, in life and conduct, submitting our understanding to His infallible Word, and our wills to His authority, regulating our conduct by His perfect pattern, and in all things seeking to serve Him and to realise His presence, then be sure of this, that we shall be set free from the one real bondage, and that is the bondage of our own wicked selves. There is no such tyranny as mob tyranny; and there is no such slavery as to be ruled by the mob of our own

passions and lusts and inclinations and other meanesses that yelp and clamour within us, and seek to get hold of us and to sway. There is only one way by which the brute domination of the lower part of our nature can be surely and thoroughly put down, and that is by turning to Jesus Christ and saying to Him, "Lord! do Thou rule this anarchic kingdom within me, for I cannot govern it myself. Do Thou guide and direct and subdue." You can only govern yourself and be free from the compulsion of your own evil nature when you surrender the control to the Master, and say ever, "Speak, Lord! for Thy slave hears. Here am I, send me."

And that is the only way by which a man can be delivered from the bondage of dependence upon outward things. I said at the beginning of these remarks that my text occurred in the course of a discussion in which the Apostle was illustrating the tendency of true Christian faith to set man free from, and to make him largely independent of, the varieties in external circumstances. Christian faith does so, because it brings into a life a sufficient compensation for all losses, limitations, and sorrows, and a good which is the reality of which all earthly goods are but shadows. So the slave may be free in Christ, and the poor man may be rich in Him, and the sad man may be joyful, and the joyful man may be delivered from excess of gladness, and the rich man kept from the temptations and sins of wealth, and the free man taught to surrender his liberty to the Lord who makes him free. Thus, if we have the all-sufficient compensation which there is in Jesus Christ, the satisfaction for all our

needs and desires, we do not need to trouble ourselves so much as we sometimes do about these changing things round about us. Let them come, let them go ; let the darkness veil the light, and the light illuminate the darkness ; let summer and winter alternate ; let tribulation and prosperity succeed each other ; we have a source of blessedness unaffected by these. Ice may skin the surface of the lake, but deep beneath the water is at the same temperature in winter and in summer. Storms may sweep the face of the deep, but in the abyss there is calm which is not stagnation. So he that cleaves to Christ is delivered from the slavery that binds men to the details and accidents of outward life.

And if we are the servants of Christ, we shall be set free, in the measure in which we are His, from the slavery which daily becomes more oppressive as the means of communication become more complete, the slavery to popular opinion and to men round us. Dare to be singular ; take your beliefs at first hand from the Master. Never mind what fellow-slaves say. It is His smile or frown that is of importance. "Ye are bought with a price ; be not servants of men."

And so, brethren, "choose you this day whom ye will serve." You are not made to be independent. You must serve some thing or person. Recognise the narrow limitations within which your choice lies, and the issues which depend upon it. It is not whether you will serve Christ or whether you will be free. It is whether you will serve Christ or your own worst self, the world, men, and I was going to

add, the flesh and the devil. Make your choice. He has bought you. You belong to Him by His death. Yield yourselves to Him; it is the only way of breaking your chains. He that doeth sin is the servant of sin. "If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed." And not only free; for the King's slaves are princes and nobles, and "all things are yours, and ye are Christ's." They who say to Him "O Lord! truly I am Thy servant," receive from Him the rank of kings and priests to God, and shall reign with Him for ever.



XII.

Two Forms of One Saying.

"HE that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved."—
MATT. xxiv. 13.

"IN your patience possess ye your souls."—LUKE xxi. 19.



THESE two sayings, different as they sound in our version, are probably divergent representations of one original. The reasons for so supposing are manifold and obvious on a little consideration.

In the first place, the two sayings occur in the Evangelists' report of the same prophecy and at the same point therein. In the second place, the verbal resemblance is much greater than appears in our Authorised Version, because the word rendered "patience" in Luke is derived from that translated "endureth" in Matthew; and the true connection between the two versions of the saying would have been more obvious if we had had a similar word in both, reading in the one "he that endureth," and in the other "in your endurance." In the third place, the difference between these two sayings presented in our version, in that the one is a promise and the other a command, is due to an incorrect reading of St. Luke's words. The Revised

Version substitutes for the imperative "possess" the promise "ye shall possess," and with that variation the two sayings come a great deal nearer each other. In both *endurance* is laid down as the condition, which in both is followed by a promise. Then, finally, there need be no difficulty in seeing that "possessing," or, more literally, "gaining your souls," is an exact equivalent of the other expression, "ye shall be saved." One cannot but remember our Lord's solemn anti-thetical phrase about a man "losing his own soul." To "win one's soul" is to be saved; to be saved is to win one's soul.

So I think I have made out my thesis that the two sayings are substantially one. They carry a great weight of warning, of exhortation, and of encouragement to us all. Let us try now to reap some of that harvest.

I.—First, then, notice the view of our condition which underlies these sayings.

It is a sad and a somewhat stern one, but it is one which, I think, most men's hearts will respond to, if they give themselves leisure to think; and if they "see life steadily, and see it whole." For howsoever many days are bright, and howsoever all days are good, yet, on the whole, "man is a soldier and life is a fight." For some of us it is simple endurance; for all of us it has sometimes been agony; for all of us, always, it presents resistance to every kind of high and noble career, and especially to the Christian one.

Easy-going optimists try to skim over these facts but they are not to be so lightly set aside. You have only to look at the faces that you meet in the street

to be very sure that it is always a grave and sometimes a bitter thing to live. And so our two texts presuppose that life on the whole demands endurance, whatever may be included in that great word.

Think of the inward resistance and outward hindrances to every lofty life. The scholar, the man of culture, the philanthropist—all that would live for anything else than the present, the low, and the sensual—find that there is a banded conspiracy, as it were, against them, and that they have to fight their way by continual antagonism, by continual persistence, as well as by continual endurance. Within weakness, torpor, weariness, levity, inconstant wills, bright purposes clouding over, and all the cowardice and animalism of our nature war continually against the better, higher self. And without, there is a down-dragging, as persistent as the force of gravity, coming from the whole assemblage of external things that solicit, and would fain seduce us.

The old legends used to tell us how, whensoever a knight set out upon any great and lofty quest, his path was beset on either side by voices, sometimes whispering seductions, and sometimes shrieking maledictions, but always seeking to withdraw him from his resolute march onwards to his goal. And every one of us, if we have taken on us the orders of any lofty chivalry, and especially if we have sworn ourselves knights of the Cross, have to meet the same antagonism; and then there are golden apples rolled upon our path, seeking to draw us away from our steadfast endurance.

Besides the hindrances in every noble path,

the hindrances within and the hindrances without, the weight of self, and the drawing of earth, there come to us all—in various degrees no doubt, and in various shapes—but to all of us there come the burdens of sorrows and cares, and anxieties and trials. There never assemble as many people as there are in this chapel this morning without some of them having to carry a sorrow which they know well will never be lifted off their shoulders and their hearts; until they lay down all their burdens at the grave's mouth; and it is weary work to plod on the path of life with a weight that cannot be shifted, with a wound that can never be stanched.

Oh, brethren, rosy-coloured optimism is all a dream. The recognition of the good that is in the evil is the devout man's talisman, but there is always need for the resistance and endurance which my texts prescribe. And the youngest of us, the gladdest of us, the least experienced of us, the most frivolous of us, if we will go into our own hearts, will hear the Amen! to the stern, sad view of the facts of earthly life which underlies this text.

Though it has many other aspects, the world seems to me sometimes to be like that pool at Jerusalem in the five porches of which lay, groaning under various diseases, but none of them without an ache, a great multitude of impotent folk, halt, and blind. Astronomers tell us that one, at any rate, of the planets rolls on its orbit swathed in clouds and moisture. The world moves wrapped in a mist of tears. God only knows them all, but each heart knows its own bitterness and responds to the words, "Ye have need of patience."

II.—Now, secondly, mark the victorious temper.

That is referred to in the one saying by "he that endureth," and in the other "in your endurance." Now, I have often had occasion to point out to you, and I daresay often shall in future, that the notion either of patience or of endurance by no means exhausts the power of this noble Christian word. For these are passive virtues, and however excellent and needful they may be, they by no means sum up our duty in regard of the hindrances and sorrows, the burdens and the weights, of which I have been trying to speak. For you know it is only "what cannot be cured" that "must be endured." And even the incurable things are not merely to be endured, but they ought to be utilised. It is not enough that we should build up a dam to keep the floods of sorrow and trial from overflowing our fields; we must turn the turbid waters into our sluices, and get them to drive our mills. It is not enough that we should screw ourselves up to lie unresistingly under the surgeon's knife; though, God knows, that is as much as we can manage sometimes, and we have to do like the convicts under the lash, get a bit of lead or a bullet into our mouths, and bite at it to keep ourselves from crying out. But that is not all our duty in regard of our trials and difficulties. There is required something more than the passive endurance.

This noble word of my texts does mean a great deal more than that. It means active persistence as well as patient submission. It is not enough that we shall stand and bear the pelting of the pitiless storm, unmurmuring and unbowed by it; but we are bound

to go on our course, bearing up and steering right onwards. Persistent perseverance in the path that is marked out for us is especially the virtue that our Lord here enjoins. It is well to sit still unmurmuring; it is better to march on undiverted and unturned. And when we are able to keep straight on the path which is marked out for us, and especially on the path that leads us to God, notwithstanding all opposing voices, and all inward hindrances and reluctances; when we are able to go to our tasks of whatever sort they be, and to do them, though our hearts are beating like sledge-hammers; when we say to ourselves, "It does not matter a bit whether I am sad or glad, fresh or wearied, helped or hindered by circumstances, this one thing I do," then we have come to understand and to practise the grace that our Master here enjoins. The endurance which wins the soul, and leads to salvation, is no mere passive submission, excellent and hard to attain as that often is; but it is brave perseverance in the face of all difficulties, and in spite of all devices.

Mark how emphatically our Lord here makes the space within which that virtue has to be exercised conterminous with the whole duration of our lives. I need not refer to what "the end" was in the original application of the words; that would take us too far afield. But this I desire to insist upon, that right on to the very close of life we are to expect the necessity of putting forth the exercise of the very same persistence by which the earlier stages of any noble career must necessarily be marked. In other departments of life there may be relaxation, as a man goes on through the

years; but in the culture of our characters, and in the deepening of our faith, and in the drawing near to our God, there must be no cessation or diminution of earnestness and of effort right up to the close.

There are plenty of people, and I daresay there are some of them here to-day, who began their Christian career full of vigour, with a heat that was too hot to last. And then in a year or two all the fervency was past, and they settled down into the average, easy-going, unprogressive Christian, who is a wet blanket to the devotion and work of a Christian church. I wonder how many of us in this congregation would scarcely know our own former selves if we could see them. Christian people, of how many of us should the word be rung in the ears: "Ye did run well; what did hinder you?" The answer is—myself.

But may I say this emphatic "to the end" has a special lesson for us older people, who, as natural strength abates, and enthusiasm cools down, are apt to be but the shadows of our old selves in many things? But there should be fire within the mountain, though there may be snow on its crest. Many a ship has been lost on the harbour bar; and there is no excuse for the captain leaving the bridge, or the engineer coming up from the engine-room, stormy as the one position and stifling as the other may be, until the anchor is down, and all is moored and quiet in the desired haven. The desert, with its wild beasts and its Bedouin, reaches right up to the city gates, and until we are within these we need to

keep our hands on our sword hilts and be ready for conflict. "He that endureth to the end the same shall be saved."

III.—Lastly, note the crown which endurance wins.

Now, I need not spend or waste your time in mere verbal criticism, but I wish to point out that that word "soul" in one of our two texts means both the soul and the life of which it is the seat; and also to remark that the being saved and the winning of the life or the soul has distinct application, in our Lord's words, primarily to corporeal safety and preservation in the midst of dangers; and, still further, to note the emphatic "*in your patience*," as suggesting not only a future but a present acquisition of one's own soul, or life, as the result of such persevering endurance and enduring perseverance. All which things being kept in view, I may expand the great promise that lies in my text, as follows:—

First, by such persevering persistence in the Christian path, we gain ourselves. Self-surrender is self-possession. We never own ourselves till we have given up owning ourselves, and yielded ourselves to that Lord who gives us back saints to ourselves. Self-control is self-possession. We do not own ourselves as long as it is possible for any weakness in flesh, sense, or spirit to gain dominion over us and hinder us from doing what we know to be right. We are not our own masters, then. "Whilst they promise them liberty, they themselves are the bond-slaves of corruption." It is only when we have the bit well into the jaws of the brutes, and the reins tight in our hands, so that a finger-touch can check or divert the course, that we

are truly lords of the chariot in which we ride and of the animals that impel it.

And such self-control which is the winning of ourselves is, as I believe, thoroughly realised only when, by self-surrender of ourselves to Jesus Christ, we get His help to govern ourselves and so become lords of ourselves. Some little petty rajah, up in the hills, in a quasi-independent State in India, is troubled by mutineers whom he cannot subdue. What does he do ? He sends a message down to Lahore or Calcutta, and up come English troops that consolidate his dominion, and he rules securely, when he has consented to become a feudatory, and recognise his overlord. And so you and I, by continual repetition, in the face of self and sin, of our acts of self-surrender, bring Christ into the field ; and then, when we have said, "Lord ! take me. I live ; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" ; and when we daily, in spite of hindrances, stand to the surrender, and repeat the consecration then, "in our perseverance we acquire our souls."

Again, such persistence wins even the bodily life, whether it preserves it or loses it. I have said that the words of our texts have an application to bodily preservation in the midst of the dreadful dangers of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. But so regarded they are a paradox. For hear how the Master introduces them. "Some of you shall they cause to be put to death, but there shall not a hair of your heads perish. In your perseverance ye shall win your lives." "Some of you they will put to death," but ye "shall win your lives." A paradox which can only be solved by experience. Whether this bodily life be preserved

or lost, it is gained when it is used as a means of attaining the higher life of union with God. Many a martyr had the promise, "Not a hair of your head shall perish," fulfilled at the very moment when the falling axe shore his locks in twain, and severed his head from his body.

Lastly, full salvation, the true possession of himself, and the acquisition of the life which really is life, comes to the man who perseveres to the end, and thus passes to the land where we shall receive the recompence of the reward. The one moment the runner, with flushed cheek and forward swaying body, hot, with panting breath, and every muscle strained, is straining to the winning post; and the next moment, in utter calm, he is wearing the crown.

"To the end, to the end." And what a contrast the next moment will be. Brethren! May it be true of you and of me that "we are not of them that draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the winning of their souls."



XIII.

God and the Godly.

"His righteousness endureth for ever."—PSALMS cxi. 3 ; cxii. 3.



THESE two psalms are obviously intended as a pair. They are identical in number of verses and in structure, both being acrostic, that is to say, the first clause of each commences with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second clause with the second, and so on. The general idea that runs through them is the likeness of the godly man to God. That resemblance comes very markedly to the surface at several points in the psalms, and pervades them traceably even where it is less conspicuous. The two corresponding clauses which I have read as my text this morning are the first salient instances of it. But I propose to deal not only with them, but with a couple of others which occur in the course of the psalms, and will appear as I proceed.

The general underlying thought is a noteworthy one. The worshipper is to be like his God. So it is in idolatry; so it should be with us. Worship is, or should be, adoration of and yearning after the highest conceivable good. Such an attitude must necessarily

lead to imitation, and be crowned by resemblance. Love makes like, and they who worship God are bound to, and certainly will, in proportion to the ardour and sincerity of their devotion, grow like Him whom they adore. So I desire to-day to look with you at the instances of this resemblance or parallelism which the Psalmist emphasises.

I.—The first of them is that in the clauses which I have read as our starting-point, viz., God and the godly are alike in enduring righteousness.

That seems a bold thing to say, especially when we remember how lofty and transcendent were the Old Testament conceptions of the righteousness of God. But, lofty as these were, this psalmist lifts an un-presumptuous eye to the heavens, and having said of Him who dwells there, "His righteousness endureth for ever," is not afraid to turn to the humble worshipper on this low earth, and declare the same thing of him. Our finite, frail, feeble lives may be really conformed to the image of the heavenly. The dewdrop with its little rainbow has a miniature of the great arch that spans the earth and rises into the high heavens. And so, though there are differences, deep and impassable, between anything that can be called a creaturely righteousness, and that which bears the same name in the heavens, the fact that it does bear the same name is a guarantee to us that there is an essential resemblance between the righteousness of God in its lustrous perfectness and the righteousness of his child in its imperfect effort.

But how can we venture to run any kind of parallelism between the eternity of the one and that

of the other? God's righteousness we can understand as enduring for ever, because it is inseparable from His very being; because it is manifested unbrokenly in all the works that for ever pour out from that central source, and because it and its doings stand fast and unshaken amidst the passage of ages and the wreck and crash of matter and of worlds. But may there not be, if not an eternity, yet a perpetuity in our reflection of the Divine righteousness which shall serve to vindicate the application of the same mighty word to both? Is it not possible that, unbroken amidst the stress of temptation, and running on without interruptions, there may be in our hearts and in our lives conformity to the Divine will? And is it not possible that the transiencies of our earthly doings may be sublimed into perpetuity if there is in them the preserving salt of righteousness?

“The actions of the just smell sweet,
And blossom in the dust.”

And may it not be, too, that though this psalmist may have had no clear articulate doctrine of eternal life beyond, he may have felt, and rightly felt, that there were things that were too fair to die, and that it was inconceivable that a soul which had been, in some measure, tinged with the righteousness of God could ever be altogether a prey to the law of transiency and decay which seizes upon things material and corporeal? That which is righteous is eternal, be it manifested in the acts of the unchanging God or in the acts of a dying man. And when all else has passed away, and the elements have melted with fervent heat, “he that

doeth the will of God," and the deeds which did it, "shall abide for ever." His righteousness endureth for ever.

Now, brethren, there are two ways in which we may look at this resemblance of our text: the one is as containing a stringent requirement; the other as holding forth a mighty hope. It contains a stringent requirement. Your religion does not consist in assenting to any creed. Your religion is not wholly to consist of devout emotions and loving and joyous acts of communion and friendship with God. There must be more than these. These things there must be. For if a man is to be guided mainly by reason, there must, first of all, be creed. Then there must be corresponding emotions. But creed and emotions are both meant to be forces which shall drive the wheels of life. And conduct is, after all, the crown of religion and the test of godliness. They that hold communion with God are bound to mould their lives into the likeness of His. "Little children, let no man deceive you." And let not your own hearts deceive you. You are not a Christian because you believe the truths of the Gospel. You are not such a Christian as you ought to be, if your religion is more manifest in loving trust than in practical obedience which comes from trust. "He that doeth righteousness is righteous," and he is to be righteous "even as He is righteous." If you are God's, you will be like God. Apply the touchstone to your lives, and test your Christianity by this simple and most stringent test.

But, again, we may look at the thought as holding forth a great hope. I do not wish to force upon Old

Testament writers New Testament truth. It would be an anachronism and an absurdity to make this psalmist responsible for anything like a clear evangelistic statement of the way by which a man may be made righteous. That waited for coming days, and eminently for Jesus Christ. But it would be quite as great a mistake to eviscerate the words of their plain implications. And when he puts side by side the light and the reflection, God and the godly, it seems to me to be doing violence to his meaning for the sake of trying to make him mean less than he does, if we refuse to recognise that he had at any rate an inkling of the thought that the original and pattern of human righteousness was likewise the source of it. This at least is plain, that he thought that "the fear of the Lord" was not only, as he calls it at the close of the former of the two psalms, "the beginning of wisdom," but also the basis of goodness, for he begins his description of the godly with it.

I believe he felt, what is assuredly true, that no man, by his own unaided effort, can ever work out for himself a righteousness which will satisfy his own conscience, and that he must, first of all, be in touch with God, in order to receive from Him that which he cannot create. Ah! brethren, the "fine linen, clean and white, which is the righteousness of saints," is woven in no earthly looms; and the lustrous light with which it glistens is such as "no fuller on earth can white" men's characters into. Another psalmist has sung of the man who can stand in the holy place. "He shall receive the blessing from the Lord, even righteousness from the God of his salvation." And

our psalms hint, if they do not articulately declare, how that reception is possible for us, when they set forth waiting upon God as the condition of being made like Him. We translate the psalmist's feeling after the higher truth which we know, when we desire "that we may be found in Him, not having our own righteousness which is of the law, but that which is of God by faith." So much, then, for the first point of correspondence in these two psalms.

II.—God and the godly are alike in gracious compassion.

If you will turn to your Bibles for a moment, and look at the last clauses of the two fourth verses, you will see how that is brought out. In the former psalm we read, "The Lord is gracious and full of compassion": in the latter we find "he" (the upright man) "is gracious and full of compassion, and righteous."

I need not trouble you with any remarks about certain difficulties that lie in the rendering of that latter verse. Suffice it to say that they are such as to make more emphatic the intentional resemblance between the godly as there described, and God as described in the previous one. Of both it is said "gracious and full of compassion."

Now that great truth of which I have been speaking, the Divine righteousness, is like white Alpine snow, sublime, but cold; awful and repellent when taken by itself. Our hearts need something more than a righteous God if we are ever to worship and draw near. Just as the white snow on the high peak needs to be flushed with the roseate hue of the morning before it can become tender, and create longings, so

the righteousness of the great White Throne has to be tinged with the ruddy heart-hue of gracious compassion if men are to be moved to adore and to love. Each enhances the other. "What God hath joined together," in Himself, "let not man put asunder"; nor talk about the stern Deity of the Old Testament, and pit Him against the compassionate Father of the New. He is righteous, but the proclaimers of His righteousness in old days never forgot to blend with the righteousness the mercy; and the combination heightens the lustre of both the colours.

The same combination is absolutely needful in the copy, as is emphatically set forth in our text by the addition in the case of the man, of "and righteous." For whilst with God the two attributes do lie, side by side, in perfect harmony, in us men there is always danger that the one shall trench upon the territory of the other, and that he who has cultivated the habit of looking upon sorrows and sins with compassion and tenderness shall somewhat lose the power of looking at them with righteousness. So our text, in regard of man, proclaims more emphatically than it needs to do in regard to the perfect God, that ever his highest beauty of compassion must be wedded to righteousness, and ever his truest strength of righteousness must be softened with compassion.

But, beyond that, note how, wherever there is the loving and childlike contemplation of God, there will be an analogy to His perfectness, in our compassion. We are transformed by beholding. The sun strikes a poor little pane of glass in a cottage miles away, and

it flashes with some likeness of the sun and casts a light across the plain. The man whose face is turned Godwards will have beauty pass into his face, and all that look upon him will see "as it had been the countenance of an angel."

If we have, in any real and deep measure, received mercy we shall reflect mercy. Remember the parable of the unmerciful debtor. The servant that cast himself at his lord's feet, and got the acquittal of his debt, and went out and gripped his fellow-servant by the throat, leaving the marks of his fingernails on his windpipe; with his "Pay me that thou owest," had all the pardon cancelled, and all the debt laid upon his shoulders again. If we owe all our hope and peace to a forgiving God, how can we make anything else the law of our lives than that, having received mercy, we should show mercy? The test of your being a forgiven man is your forgivingness. There is no getting away from that plain principle, which modifies the declaration of the freedom of God's full pardon.

But I would have you notice, further, as a very remarkable illustration of this correspondence between the gracious and compassionate Lord and His servant, that in the verses which follow respectively the two about which I am now speaking, the same idea is wrought out in another shape. In the psalm dealing with the Divine character and works we read, immediately after the declaration that He is "gracious and full of compassion," this—"He hath given meat to them that fear Him"; and the corresponding clause in the second of our psalms is followed by this—to translate accurately—"It is well with the man who

showeth favour and lendeth." So man's open-handedness in regard of money is put down side by side with God's open-handedness in regard of giving meat unto them that fear Him. And again, in the ninth verse of each psalm, we have the same thought set forth in another fashion. "He sent redemption unto His people," says the one; "He hath dispersed, He hath given to the poor," says the other. That is to say, our paltry giving may be paralleled with the unspeakable gifts which God has bestowed, if they come from a love which is like His. It does not matter though they are small and His are so great; there is a resemblance. The tiniest crystal may be like the hugest. God gives to us the possession of things in order that we may enjoy the luxury, which is one of the elements in the blessedness of the blessed God, who is blessed because He is the giving God, the luxury of giving. And poor though our bestowments must be, they are not unlike His. The little burn amongst the heather carves its tiny bed, and impels its baby ripples, by the same laws which roll the waters of the Amazon, and every fall that it makes over a shelf of rock a foot high is a miniature Niagara.

III.—So, lastly, we have still another point, not so much of resemblance as of correspondence, in the firmness of God's utterances and of the godly heart.

In the first of our two psalms we read, in the seventh verse, "all His commandments are *sure*." In the second we read, in the corresponding verse, "his heart is *fixed*, trusting in the Lord." The former psalm

goes on, "His commandments *stand fast* for ever and ever; and the next psalm, in the corresponding verse, says "his heart is *established*," the original employing the same word in both cases, which in our version is rendered, in the one place, "stand fast," and in the other "established." So that the psalmist is thinking of a correspondence between the stability of God's utterances and the stability of the heart that clasps them in faith.

His commandments are not only precepts which enjoin duty. All which God says is law, whether it be directly in the nature of guiding precept, or whether it be in the nature of revealing truth, or whether it be in the nature of promise. It is sure, reliable, utterly trustworthy. We may be certain that it will direct us aright, that it will reveal to us absolute truth, that it will hold forth no flattering and false promises. And it is "established." The one fixed point amidst the whirl of things is the uttered will of God.

Therefore, the heart that builds there builds safely. And there *should be* a correspondence, whether there *is* or no, between the faithfulness of the Speaker and the faith of the hearer. A man who is doubtful about the solidity of the parapet which keeps him from toppling over into the abyss will lean gingerly upon it, until he has found out that it is firm. The man that knows how strong is the stay on which he rests ought to lean hard upon it. Lean hard upon God, put all your weight upon Him. You cannot put too much, you cannot lean too hard. The harder the better; the better He is pleased, and the more He breathes support and strength into us. And, brethren, if thus we build

an established faith on that sure foundation, and match the unchangeableness of God in Christ with the constancy of our faith in Him, then, "he that believeth shall never make haste." And as my psalm says, "he shall not be afraid of evil tidings; his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord."

The upshot of the whole matter is,—we cannot work out for ourselves a righteousness that will satisfy our own consciences, nor secure for ourselves a strength that will give peace to our hearts, and stability to our lives, by any other means than by cleaving fast to God revealed in Jesus Christ.

We have borne the image of the earthly long enough; let us open our hearts to God in Christ. Let us yield ourselves to Him; let us gaze upon Him with fixed eyes of love, and labour to make our own what He bestows upon us. And thus living near Him, we shall be bathed in His light, and show forth something of His beauty. Godliness is God-likeness. It is of no use to say that we are God's children if we have none of the family likeness. "If ye were Abraham's sons ye would do the works of Abraham," said Christ to the Jews. If we are God's sons we shall do the works of God. "Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect"; be ye merciful as your Father is merciful. And if thus we here, dwelling with Christ, are being conformed to the image of His Son, we shall one day "be satisfied" when we "awake in His likeness."

XIV.

A Petulant Wish.

"**A**ND Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before Thee!"—GEN. xvii. 18.



THESE words sound very devout, and they have often been used by Christian parents yearning for the best interests of their children, and sometimes of their wayward and prodigal children. But, consecrated as they are by that usage, I am afraid that their meaning, as they were uttered, was nothing so devout and good as that which is often attached to them.

I.—Note the temper in which Abraham speaks here.

The very existence of Ishmael was a memorial of Abraham's failure in faith and patience. For he thought that the promised heir was long in coming, and so he thought that he would help God. For thirteen years the child had been living beside him, winding a son's way into a father's heart, with much in his character, as was afterwards seen, that would make a frank, daring boy his old father's darling. Then all at once comes the Divine message, "This is not the son of the covenant; this is not the heir of

the promise. Sarah shall have a child, and from him shall come the blessings that have been foretold." What does Abraham do? Fall down in thankfulness before God? leap up in heart at the conviction that now at last the long looked for fulfilment of the oath of God was impending? Not he. "O that *Ishmael* might live before Thee! Why cannot *he* do? Why may he not be the chosen child, the heir of the promise? Take him, O God!"

That is to say, he thinks he knows better than God. He is petulant, he resists His blessing, he fancies that his own plan is quite as good as the Divine plan. He does not want to draw away his heart from the child whom it has twined round. So he loses the blessing of the revelation that is being made to him; because he does not bow his will, and accept God's way instead of his own. Now, do you not think that that is what we do? When God sends us Isaac, do we not often say, 'Take Ishmael; he is my own making. I have set all my hopes on him. Why should I have to wrench them all away?' In our individual lives we want to prescribe to God, far too often, not only the *ends*, but the *way* in which we shall get to the *ends*; and we think to ourselves "that road of my own engineering that I have got all staked out, that is the true way for God's providence to take." And when His path does not coincide with ours, then we are discontented, and instead of submitting we go with our pet schemes to Him, and, if not in so many words, at least in spirit and temper, we try to force our way upon God. When He is speaking to us about Isaac we insist on pressing Ishmael on His notice.

It is often so in regard of our individual lives; and it is so in regard of the united action of Christian people very often. A great deal of what calls itself earnest contending for "the faith once delivered to the saints" is nothing more nor less than insisting that methods of men's devising shall be continued, when God seems to be substituting for them methods of His own sending, and so fighting about externals and church polity, and determining that the world has got to be saved in our own special fashion, and in no other, though God Himself seems to be suggesting a new thing to us. That is a very frequent phenomenon in the experience of Christian communities and churches. Ishmael is so very dear. He is not the child of promise, but he is the child that we have thought it advisable to help God with. It is hard for us to part with him.

Dear brethren, sometimes, too, God comes to us in various providences, and not only reduces into chaos and a heap of confusion our nicely built up little houses, but He sometimes comes to us, and lifts us out of some lower kind of good, which is perfectly satisfactory to us, or all but perfectly satisfactory, in order to give to us something nobler and higher. We resist that too; and do not see why Ishmael should not serve God's turn as he has served ours; or think that there is no need at all for Isaac to come into our lives. God never takes away from us a lower, unless for the purpose of bestowing upon us a higher blessing. Therefore, not to submit is the foolishest thing that men can do.

But if this is anything like an account of the

temper expressed by this saying, is it not strange that murmuring against God takes the shape of praying ? Ah ! there is a great deal of "prayer," as it calls itself, which is just moulded upon this petulant word of Abraham's momentarily failing faith and submission. How many people think that to pray means to bring their wishes to God, and try to coax Him to make them His wishes ! Why, half the shallow sceptical talk of this generation about the worthlessness of prayer goes upon that fundamental fallacy, that the notion of prayer is to dictate terms to God ; and that unless a man gets his wishes answered he is not to suppose that his prayers are answered. But it is not so. Prayer does not mean, "O that Ishmael might live before Thee." That is a poor kind of prayer, of which the inmost spirit is resistance to a clear dictate of the Divine will ; but the true prayer is, "Oh, that I may be willing to take what Thou art willing, in Thy mercy and love, to send."

I believe in importunate prayer, but I believe also that a great deal of what calls itself importunate prayer is nothing more than an obstinate determination not to be satisfied with what satisfies God. If a man has been bringing his wishes—and he cannot but have such—continuously to God, with regard to any outward things, and these have not been answered, he needs to look very carefully into his own temper and heart in order to make sure that what seems to be waiting upon God in importunate petition is not pestering Him with refused desires. To make a prayer out of my rebellion against His will is surely the greatest abuse of prayer that can be con-

ceived. And when Abraham said, "O that Ishmael might live before Thee," if he said it in the spirit in which I think he did, he was not praying, but he was grumbling.

II.—Notice, still further, how such a temper and such a prayer have the effect of hiding joy and blessing from us.

This was the crisis of Abraham's whole life. It was the moment at which his hundred years nearly of patient waiting was about to be rewarded. The message which he had just received was the most loving and gracious word that ever had come to him from the heavens, although many such words had come. And what does he do with it? Instead of falling down before God, and letting his whole heart go out in jubilant gratitude, he has nothing to say but "I would rather that Thou didst it in another way. It is all very well to speak about sending this heir of promise. I have no pleasure in that, because it means that my Ishmael is to be passed by and shelved." So the proffered joy is turned to ashes, and Abraham gets no good, for the moment, out of God's greatest blessing to him; but all the sky is darkened by mists that come up from his own heart.

Brethren, if you want to be miserable, perk up your own will against God's. If you want to be blessed, acquiesce in all that He does send, in all that He has sent, and, by anticipation, in all that He will send. For, depend upon it, the secret of finding sunbeams in everything is simply letting God have His own way, and making your will the sounding-board and echo of His. If Abraham had done as he ought

to have done, that would have been the gladdest moment of his life. You and I can make out of our deepest sorrows the occasions of pure, though it is quiet, gladness, if only we have learned to say, "Not my will, but Thy will be done." That is the talisman that turns everything into gold, and makes sorrow forget its nature, and almost approximate to solemn joy.

III.—My last word is this: such a prayer God loves us all too well to listen to.

Abraham's passionate cry was so much empty wind, and was like a straw laid across the course of an express train, in so far as its power to modify the gracious purpose of God already declared was concerned. And would it not be a miserable thing if we could deflect the solemn, loving march of the Divine Providence by these hot, foolish, purblind wishes of ours, that see only the nearer end of things, and have no notion of where their further end may go, or what it may be?

Is it not better that we should fall back upon this thought, though it seems so to limit the power of petition at first sight, "We know that if we ask anything according to His will He heareth us"? There is nothing that would more wreck our lives than if what some people wish were to be the case—that God should let us have our own way, and give us serpents because we asked for them and fancied they were eggs; or let us break our teeth upon bestowed stones, because, like whimpering children crying for the moon, we had asked for them under the delusion that they were bread.

Leave all things in His hands; and be sure of this, that the true way to peace, to rest, to gladness, and to wringing the last drop of possible sweetness out of gifts and losses, disappointments and fruitions, is to have no will but God's will enthroned above and in our own wills. If Abraham had acquiesced and submitted, Ishmael and Isaac would have been a pair to bless his life, as they stood together over his grave. And if you and I will leave God to order all our ways, and not try to interfere with His purposes by our short-sighted dictation, "all things will work together for good to us, because we love God," and lovingly accept His will and His law.



XV.

Seeking and Seeing.

"WHOM seek ye? . . . Come and see."—JOHN i. 38, 39.



THESE are the first words of Christ's recorded in this gospel. The evangelist had undoubtedly been one of the two disciples of John the Baptist to whom they were spoken, and it is beautiful to see how, after so many years had dimmed other memories, that unforgettable day on which he first heard Christ's voice and felt the charm of His presence, was all sun-clear and bright before him to its minutest detail. But I think that, as in so many other places in this gospel, John would here have us see a deeper meaning than the original one in these words. It is surely noticeable that the first words of Christ's which he records suggest such wide and deep truths as do these two sayings. It is in that higher application that I desire to look at them in this sermon.

I need do little more than recall to your remembrance their occasion. It is the first day of Christ's public ministry. Yesterday John the Baptist had proclaimed Him to be the Lamb of God. To-day he crowns his sublime self-suppression by, in effect,

bidding his two disciples leave him and attach themselves to Jesus Christ. No base envy embittered his recognition that he must decrease, whilst Christ must increase. Rather, like the planet of morning, he rejoiced to "fade in His light and to die." Never was a nobler piece of self-effacement than that which John achieved that day by the fords of the Jordan.

The two disciples heard, and understood, and obeyed. They seem to have followed Christ, as they thought, unobserved, without any further purpose than that of marking where He dwelt, in order that they might seek a future interview. But He who never leaves unnoticed and unfostered the first faint inclination to follow Him, turned upon them with the question "What seek ye?" They answer, hesitating and embarrassed, hinting rather than daring to speak out their wish for an interview, and more than hinting their purpose to attach themselves to Him, since they address Him as "Rabbi!" *Master*. He met the two shy youths more than half way, and smiled on them with an invitation which, according to the reading of the *Revised Version*, is a promise as well as an invitation. "Come! and ye will see."

Surely the words carry a tone of invitation and interrogation far deeper than their application to the comparatively trivial incident of that moment. Surely they are meant for us all. Let us try to profit by them.

I.—Note the penetrating question.

"What seek ye?" In its original application it was the obvious question for anyone to ask, who found two men stealing along behind him. But the

whole character of it depended on the tone and look which accompanied it. "What do you want?" might be as harsh as a blow, and equivalent to a refusal beforehand; or it might be icy and indifferent; or, it might pass through all the varying shades of amiability, until it came to be what it was to these two, as commented on by the beaming look that went with the tone, an encouragement to boldness, and more than half a promise to grant their request.

"What seek ye?" It is a penetrating question. It is a question that Jesus Christ asks us all. Now, that is not rhetoric; that is plain, simple fact. For one distinct purpose of His whole mission was to force men to front this question, "What am I living for?" and to look at it in the light of the principles that are drawn from His own personality, His life and His death. By setting forth before the whole world the one true model of what the aims of a man should be, Jesus Christ won the right, and exercises the right wherever that revelation comes, of questioning each man to whom it comes, "Dost thou make thy life run parallel with Mine? Are the things that I sought in My manhood the things that thou dost seek?"

And not only by that past revelation, but in a still deeper and solemn way, by His present action upon all men who come within the range of the Gospel, He is asking them this question, and, as I believe, we might extend the principle and say that wherever there is a man with the light of conscience and reason within him, that is a spark and effluence from the light which was incarnated in Jesus Christ, and that He Himself, in very deed, does speak in men's hearts,

and that it is His solemn voice that sounds to each of us in what we call conscience. And so, brethren, I venture to assert that the question which opens His ministry, in the deepest of all the gospels, is the question with which He fronts the world still, and asks them, "What seek ye?"

And mind, He has a right to ask the question, "for the Father hath committed all judgment to the Son." And you have got to submit a programme of your life to Him which will pass muster with Him before you are right.

As was the case here, remember He knows the answer before it is given. There is nothing more characteristic of these earlier chapters of John's Gospel than the pains which he takes to bring out Christ's knowledge of all the men and women that met Him, before they opened their lips. So do not try to masquerade before Him, but see that your answers be according to truth, when He says, as He is saying to each of you, by my poor word now, "What is it that you really want and live for?"

Brethren, there can be no greater blessing to men than that they should thus be forced (as I am trying, I hope gently and lovingly, to oblige my hearers) to look this question in the face. For there is nothing in which men's stupidity and gregariousness are more sadly displayed than in the lack of any habitual clear presentation to themselves of what it is that they are living for, and what the meaning of all the hubbub and fret and "business" and anxiety really at bottom is. To live without ever facing this question is the melancholy condition in which millions of men are.

And there is nothing more needful, and few things more unwelcome, to some of us than that the sharp point of this interrogation should be driven deep into our consciences, "What seek ye?"

Suppose the question put to some man in this chapel to-night. If he is honest, he says, if I may turn into English the old Latin proverb, "Money! money got anyhow! Money!" Is that your answer? Another man says: "Culture! culture! culture!" Another one says, if he is true: "Lust! That is what I seek—the gratification of the beast that is in me"; the satisfaction of the appetites that are there and are to be rigidly kept in restraint, and so kept in restraint, are elements in perfection and allies of nobleness. And some of you would have to say: "What am I seeking for? Well, really, upon my word, I do not know! I never thought of what the trend of my life was, and what I was really aiming at." Does the cap fit—do any of the caps fit—any of my hearers? In some measure they fit us all, brethren. Do not let us try to wriggle out of the solemn necessity that is laid upon us, because we are rational creatures with a conscience within us, and for whom Christ died, of giving account of ourselves and of our aims to Him.

If, as I am sure is the case, there are some of us who can say: "Well, I seek for the highest, the permanent, the all-sufficient good," then the recognition of what we really do require will go a long way to settle for us the question where we are to find it. "Men do not gather grapes of thorns." The gold-seeker does not hunt in dunghills. If you want to pick roses you will not go into the slums. If you desire treasures,

jewels, and precious things you know that they lie up amongst the mountains in the rocks. And if we have once clearly recognised what is the aim of our lives—viz., as I have said, adequate, permanent, supreme good—then, if we seek for good, we must look for it, and find it, in God.

Remember, too, that Jesus Christ will ask a similar question of each of us another day. On earth He says, “What seek ye?” When we stand at His judgment bar, He will ask, “What sought ye?” And, that we may be able to answer *that*, let us answer *this* one as these men did. Blessed are they who, when Christ asks “What?” Could answer “Thee!” The “What” that a human heart should seek is a “Whom.” And only those who say “Master! we would come and dwell with Thee,” have learned the true answer to the question as to what they seek. If we answer thus, then all the weariness and failures of hunting after substances amidst shadows, and groping for diamonds in mud-heaps, are at an end; and the dove folds its wings and rests, and the blessedness of having found takes the place of the unrest and anxiety of continual search and continual failure.

But there is another side to this penetrating question: for, as I remarked at the beginning of this sermon, there lay in it, as it was originally put, more than half a promise that, whatever the request was, it should be granted. Christ’s look—and, be sure, the intonation of that voice, into which “grace was poured”—took all the possible harshness out of the interrogation, and made it all but an assurance that, whatever the petition was, it would be fulfilled.

“What seek ye?” is almost like putting the key of His treasure-house into our hands. And He still says to us, “What is thy petition? and what is thy request? and it shall be granted thee.”

The measure of our requests is the working measure of the power that He bestows. We get in and from Jesus Christ just as much, and just that which our desires are wide enough to receive, and our expectations firm enough to retain. The whole Christ is offered to each of us, and whatsoever may be our petition, that we shall get.

Oh, brother, there is only one region of human experience in which wish is identical with fulfilment; only one source from which we can draw exactly as much as we want. It is that great fountain which, like the fountain of oil in the old miracle, flows and fills every vessel that the poverty-stricken and starving widow woman can bring, and only stops its flow when she stops presenting the emptinesses to be filled. “What seek ye?” That is to say, “Ask and ye shall receive; seek and ye shall find.” Are any of our other aims so sure of accomplishment as this? Why, then, should men be, as so many of us are, and as all of us are, more or less, such fools as to fling away our efforts, and wrack our brains, and torture our hearts, and wear our finger-nails to the stump, in grasping and clutching and driving and scheming and toiling, when all the while a wish for the highest good brings the inrush of that good into our souls?

There are, as the wise old psalm tells us, two ways of seeking. The one of them is effort, which always fails—“the young lions do lack and suffer hunger.”

The other is turning to the one Source with a great emptiness, and a great desire, and a great trust, and "they that seek the Lord shall not want any good." So, brother, when Christ says to you, "What seekest thou?" answer, "Thyself, O Lord."

II.—Note here the universal invitation. "Come!" And if we adopt the other rendering to which I have already referred, "Come, and ye shall see."

Now, I suppose I need not vindicate my purpose of putting away altogether the original simple application of these words, and reading into them a deeper meaning. I take it that their place in this gospel stamps upon them such a significance as being intended by the Evangelist.

"Come"—a universal invitation. Now, do not let us have any misunderstandings about metaphors. Jesus Christ is gone away. That is no reason why you and I should not come to Him. What is "presence"? Is it the juxtaposition of material atoms? or is it the union, as of two polished plates of metal, of soul with soul and heart with heart? "Where a man's treasure is, there shall his heart be also." And where his heart is, he—the best part of him—is.

So through the mists of nineteen centuries, and through the clouds of the lower sky and the upper strata of glories, we to-day can come to Christ, more really by far, than these two men who knew so little about Him, and clung so closely to His skirts.

What is the meaning of the metaphor? A very threadbare meaning. Jesus Christ shall be His own commentator when He says: "He that cometh unto

Me shall never hunger ; and He that believeth on Me shall never thirst." So, then, you may put the one phrase for the other wherever it occurs. Coming is trust and trust is coming. And where the mind is occupied believingly with Jesus Christ and the truth that lives in Him and flows from Him, and where the heart twines its tendrils round that perfectly loving and infinite heart, and the will, in contact with His supreme will, is supplied and made docile for, and strengthened by, obedience, and where the conscience is cleansed from guilt by the touch of His finger laid on the believing soul, there, even here and now, we may be "present with the Lord."

There is no mystery about that beyond the mystery of love. The path is plain, the requirement is reasonable, and the reward is great. Come!—that is, trust yourself body, soul, and spirit to Christ ; and, having come, keep beside Him by the exercise of the same faith, meditation, outgoing of affection, submission of will, and practical obedience ; and though you are present in the body, you will not be absent from the Lord.

Brethren, that invitation is given to the world, because it is given to each individual soul. It is given to thee. You would not refuse an invitation from a prince. Why do you turn away from this one ? By His own word, by His voice in your hearts, by the very make of your spirits, He is calling to you to come. By sorrows, disappointments, experience of the illusions of earthly search, and the vanity of earthly findings, He is at least saying to you, " Go ! this is not your rest," and in the " Go ! " there is a " Come ! " And oh, brethren, surely it is not the part of wise men and

women, nor of people that have regard to their own supreme good, to turn a deaf ear, as so many of us do, to that gracious invitation.

It was almost His first word to the world—"Come, and ye shall see." It echoes all through His earthly ministry: "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink." With open hands of invitation, like the great statue of a modern sculptor in the pediment of a church, the Christ stands, beckoning all to come to Him, and ready to fold the extended arms, when they come, and clasp them to His bosom; "come unto Me, all ye that labour." And all but the last word which this same evangelist records as having heard Christ speak from heaven, in the Book of Revelation, is, "Let him that is athirst come; and whosoever will, let him come and take of the water of life freely."

Just as in the earlier interrogation there was a promise couched and half concealed, so, if we adopt the reading already referred to, in this last invitation there is another promise: "Come, and ye shall see." Yes! faith is the condition of vision. Trusting Him we have experience of Him, His preciousness, His power, the veracity of His promises, the faithfulness of His fulfilment, which they who do not exercise faith in Him can never possess.

The verification of Christianity requires a Christian. That is perfectly reasonable. You cannot tell the savour of any food till you have eaten of it. You do not know what the meaning of love is till you have loved. No words nor demonstrations of any sort can teach any of the emotions of life to a man until he himself has passed through them. You cannot make

a blind man know the glories of the sunshine, nor a deaf one understand the magnificent roll of the thunder. No more can you judge of Christianity, in its greatness, its sweetness, its reality, and its power, until you have "tasted" and then "seen" that "the Lord is good." Come, and you will see, here and now, how great and precious Jesus Christ is.

No man that has come has ever gone away and said, "It is a delusion; there is nothing to see." The language of all who have trusted is, "Once I was blind; now I see."

That has been the experience of millions, and it will be yours, until the day comes when the promise shall receive its sublimest fulfilment, and our coming to Christ amidst the dusk and the darknesses of earth shall lead on to the full vision of the undying day in the heavens.

I beseech you, dear friends, to answer Christ's invitation as promptly and as fully as these two did; and then their blessed experience will be yours. "He saith unto them, Come, and ye shall see." "And they came, and they saw."



XVI.

The Servant of the Lord.

"UNTO you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities."—
ACTS iii. 26.



O ended Peter's bold address to the wondering crowd gathered in the Temple Courts, around him, with his companion John and the lame man whom they had healed. A glance at his words will show how extraordinarily outspoken and courageous they are. He charges home on his hearers the guilt of Christ's death, unfalteringly proclaims His Messiahship, bears witness to His resurrection and ascension, asserts that He is the end and fulfilment of ancient revelation, and offers to all the great blessings that Christ brings. And this fiery, tender oration came from the same lips which, a few weeks before had been blanched with fear before a flippant maid-servant, and had quivered as they swore, "I know not the man."

One or two simple observations may be made by way of introduction. "Unto you *first*"—"first" implies second; and so the Apostle has shaken himself clear of the Jew's narrow belief that Messias belonged

to them only, and is already beginning to contemplate the possibility of a transference of the kingdom of God to the outlying Gentiles. "God having raised up His Son"—that expression has no reference, as it might at first seem, to the fact of the resurrection; but is employed in the same sense as, and, indeed, looks back to, previous words. For he had just quoted Moses' declaration, "A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you from your brethren." So it is Christ's equipment and appointment for His office, and not His resurrection, which is spoken about here. "His Son Jesus"—the *Revised Version* more accurately translates "His Servant Jesus." I shall have a word or two to say about that presently, but in the meantime I simply note the fact.

With this slight explanation let us now turn to two or three of the aspects of the words before us.

I.—First, I note the extraordinary transformation which they indicate in the speaker.

I have already referred to his cowardice a very short time before. That transformation from a coward to a hero he shared in common with his brethren. On one page we read, "They all forsook Him and fled." We turn over half a dozen leaves and we read: "They departed from the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name." What did that?

Then there is another transformation no less swift, sudden, and inexplicable, except on one hypothesis. All through Christ's life the disciples had been singularly slow to apprehend the highest aspects of His teachings, and they had clung with a strange obstinacy

to their narrow Pharisaic and Jewish notions of the Messiah as coming to establish a temporal dominion, in which Israel was to ride upon the necks of the subject nations. And now, all at once, this apostle, and his fellows with him, have stepped from these puerile and narrow ideas out into this large place, that he and they recognise that the Jew had no exclusive possession of Messiah's blessings, and that these blessings were no external kingdom of the earth, but lay mainly and primarily in his "turning every one of you from your iniquities." At one time the apostles stood upon a gross, low, carnal level, and in a few weeks they were, at all events, feeling their way to, and to a large extent had possession of, the most spiritual and lofty aspects of Christ's mission. What did that?

Something had come in between which wrought more, in a short space, than all the three years of Christ's teaching and companionship had done for them. What was it? Why did they not continue in the mood which two of them are reported to have been in, after the Crucifixion, when they said—It is all up! "We trusted that this had been He," and the force of circumstances has shivered the confidence into fragments, and there is no such hope left for us any longer. What brought them out of that Slough of Despond?

I would put it to any fair-minded man whether the psychological facts of this sudden maturing of these childish minds, and their sudden change from slinking cowards into heroes, who did not blanch before the torture and the scaffold, are accountable, if you strike out the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Pentecost?

It seems to me that, for the sake of avoiding a miracle, the disbelievers in the resurrection accept an impossibility, and tie themselves to an intellectual absurdity. And I for one would rather believe in a miracle than believe in an uncaused change, in which the apostles take exactly the opposite course from that which they necessarily must have taken, if there had not been the facts that the New Testament tells us there were, Christ's rising again from the dead and ascension.

Why did not the Church share the fate of John's disciples, who scattered like sheep without a shepherd when Herod chopped off their master's head ? Why did not the Church share the fate of that abortive rising, of which we know that when Theudas, its leader, was slain, "all, as many as believed on him, came to nought." Why did these men act in exactly the opposite way ? I take it that, as you cannot account for Christ except on the hypothesis that He is the Son of the Highest, you cannot account for the continuance of the Christian Church for a week after the Crucifixion ; except on the hypothesis that the men that composed it were witnesses of His resurrection, and saw Him floating upwards and received into the Shekinah cloud and lost to their sight. Peter's change, witnessed by the words of my text—these bold and clear-sighted words—seems to me to be a perfect monstrosity, and incapable of explication, unless he saw the risen Lord, beheld the ascended Christ, was touched with the fiery spirit descending on Pentecost, and so "out of weakness was made strong," and from a babe sprung to the stature of a man in Christ.

II.—Look at these words as setting forth a remarkable view of Christ.

I have already referred to the fact that the word rendered "son" ought rather to be rendered "servant." It literally means "child" or "boy," and appears to have been used familiarly, just in the same fashion as we use the same expression "boy," or its equivalent "maid," as a more gentle designation for a servant. Thus the kindly centurion, when he would bespeak our Lord's care for his menial, calls him his "boy"; and our Bible there translates rightly "servant."

Again, the designation is that which is continually employed in the Greek translation of the Old Testament as the equivalent for the well-known prophetic phrase "the Servant of Jehovah," which, as you will remember, is characteristic of the second portion of the prophecies of Isaiah. And consequently we find that, in a quotation of Isaiah's prophecy in the Gospel of Matthew, the very phrase of our text is there employed: "Behold My Servant whom I uphold."

Now, it seems as if this designation of our Lord as God's servant was very familiar to Peter's thoughts at this stage of the development of Christian doctrine. For we find the name employed twice in this discourse—in the thirteenth verse, "the God of our Fathers hath glorified His Servant Jesus," and again in my text. We also find it twice in the next chapter, where Peter, offering up a prayer amongst his brethren, speaks of "Thy Holy Child Jesus," and prays "that signs and wonders may be done through the name" of that "Holy Child." So, then, I think

we may fairly take it that, at the time in question, this thought of Jesus as the "Servant of the Lord" had come with especial force to the primitive Church. And the fact that the designation never occurs again in the New Testament seems to show that they passed on from it into a deeper perception than even it attests of who and what this Jesus was in relation to God.

But, at all events, we have in our text the Apostle looking back to that dim, mysterious Figure that rises up with shadowy lineaments out of the great prophecy of the past, and thrilling with awe and wonder, as he sees, bit by bit, in the face painted on the prophetic canvas, the likeness of the face into which he had looked for three blessed years, that now began to tell him more than they had done whilst their moments were passing.

"The Servant of the Lord"—that means, first of all, that Christ, in all that He does, meekly and obediently executes the Father's will. As He Himself said, "I come not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me." But it carries us further than that, to a point about which I would like to say one word now; and that is, the clear recognition of the prophetic disclosure in ancient revelation of the personality of Jesus Christ. Now, it seems to me that present tendencies, discussions about the nature and limits of inspiration, investigations which, in many directions, are to be welcomed and are fruitful as to the manner of origin of the books of the Old Testament, and as to their collection into a canon and a whole—that all that set of thought has a

counterbalancing disadvantage, in that it tends somewhat to obscure in men's minds the great central truth about the revelation of God in Israel—viz., that it was all progressive, and that its goal and end was Jesus Christ. “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy,” and however much we may have to learn—and I have no doubt that we have a great deal to learn about the composition, the structure, the authorship, the date of these ancient books—I take leave to say that the unlearned reader, who recognises that they all converge on Jesus Christ, has hold of the clue of the labyrinth, and has come nearer to the marrow of the books than the most learned investigators, who see all manner of things besides in them, and do not see that “they that went before cried, saying, Hosanna! Blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord.”

And so I venture to commend to you, brethren—not as a barrier against any reverent investigation, not as stopping any careful study—this as the central truth concerning the ancient revelation, that it had, for its chief business, to proclaim the coming of the Servant of Jehovah, Jesus the Christ.

III.—And now, lastly, look at these words as setting forth the true centre of Christ's work.

“He has sent Him to bless you in turning away every one of you from his iniquity.” I have already spoken about the gross, narrow, carnal apprehensions of Messiah's work which cleaved to the disciples during all our Lord's life here, and which disturbed even the sanctity of the upper chamber at that last meal with squabbles about precedence which had an eye to

places in the court of the Messiah when He assumed His throne. But here Peter has shaken himself clear of all these, and has grasped the thought that, whatsoever derivative and secondary blessings of an external and visible sort may, and must, come in Messiah's train, *the blessing which He brings is of a purely spiritual and inward character, and consists in turning away single souls from their love and practice of evil.* That is Christ's true work.

The Apostle does not enlarge as to how it is done. We know how it is done. Jesus turns away men from sin because, by the magnetism of His love, and the attractive raying out of influence from His cross, He turns them to Himself. He turns us from our iniquities by the expulsive power of a new affection, which, coming into our hearts like a great tide into some foul Augean stable, sweeps out on its waters all the filth that no broom can ever clear out in detail. He turns men from their iniquities by His gift of a new life, kindred with that from which it is derived.

There is an old superstition that lightning turned whatever it struck towards the point from which the flash came, so that a tree with its thousand leaves had each of them pointed to that quarter in the heavens where the blaze had been.

And so Christ, when He rays out the beneficent flash that slays only our evil, and vitalises ourselves, turns us to Him, and away from our transgressions, "Turn us! O Christ! and we shall be turned."

Ah, brethren, that is the blessing that we need most, for iniquities are universal; and so long as man is bound to his sin it will embitter all other sweet-

nesses, and neutralise every other blessing. It is not culture, valuable as that is in many ways, that will avail to stanch man's deepest wounds. It is not a new social order that will still the discontent and the misery of humanity. You may adopt collective economic and social arrangements, and divide property out as it pleases you. And as long as man continues selfish he will continue sinful, and as long as he continues sinful *any* social order will be pregnant with sorrow, "and when it is finished it will bring forth death." You have to go deeper down than all that, down as deep as this Apostle goes in this sermon of his, and recognise that Christ's prime blessing is the turning of men from their iniquities, and that only after that has been done will other good come.

How shallow, by the side of that conception, do modern notions of Jesus as the great social Reformer look ! These are true, but they want their basis, and their basis lies only here, that He is the Redeemer of individuals from their sins. There were people in Christ's lifetime who were all untouched by His teachings, but when they found that He gave bread miraculously they said, "Ah ! This is of a truth the Prophet ! That's the prophet for my money ; the Man that can make bread, and satisfy material well-being." Have not certain modern views of Christ's work and mission a good deal in common with these vulgar old Jews—views which regard Him mainly as contributing to the material good, the social and economical well-being of the world ?

Now, I believe that He does that. And I believe that Christ's principles are going to revolutionise

society as it exists at present. But I am sure that we are on a false scent if we attempt to preach consequences without proclaiming their antecedents, and that it will end, as all such attempts have ended, in confusion and disappointment.

They used to talk about Jesus Christ, in the first French Revolution, as "The Good *Sansculotte*." Perfectly true! But as the basis of that, and of all representations of Him, that will have power on the diseases of the community, we have to preach Him as the Saviour of the individual from his sin.

And so, brethren, has He saved you? Do you begin your notions of Jesus Christ where His work begins? Do you feel that what you want most is neither culture nor any superficial and external changes, but something that will deal with the deep, indwelling, rooted, obstinate self-regard which is the centre of all sin? And have you gone alone to Him as a sinful man? As the Apostle here suggests, Jesus Christ does not save communities. The doctor has his patients into the consulting room one by one. There is no applying of Christ's benefits to men in batches, by platoons and regiments, as Clovis baptized his Franks; but you have to go, everyone of you, through the turnstile singly, and alone to confess, and alone to be absolved, and alone to be turned from your iniquity.

If I might venture to alter the position of words in my text, I would lay them, so modified, on the hearts of all my friends listening to me now, and say, "Unto you—unto thee, God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, *first* in turning away every one of you from his iniquities."

XVII.

The Healing Power of the Name.

“ HIS name, through faith in His name, hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by Him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.”—
ACTS iii. 16.



ETER said, “ Why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk ? ” eagerly disclaiming being anything else than a medium through which Another’s power operated. Jesus Christ said, “ that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, I say unto thee, Arise ! take up thy bed, and walk ”; unmistakably claiming to be a great deal more than a medium. Why the difference ? Jesus Christ did habitually in His miracles adopt the tone which Moses once ventured on, when he smote the rock, and said, “ Ye rebels ! must we bring the water for you ? ” and he was punished for it by exclusion from the Promised Land. Why the difference ? Moses was “ in all his house as a servant, but Christ as a Son over His own house ”; and what was arrogance in the servant was natural and reasonable in the Son.

The gist of this verse is a reference to Jesus Christ

as a source of miraculous power, not merely because He wrought miracles when on earth, but because from heaven He gave the power of which Peter was but the channel. Now it seems to me that in these emphatic and singularly reduplicated words of the Apostle there are two or three very important lessons which I offer for your consideration.

I.—The first is the power of the Name.

Now the Name of which Peter is speaking is not the collocation of syllables which are sounded "Jesus Christ." His hearers were familiar with the ancient and Eastern method of regarding names as very much more than distinguishing labels. They are, in the view of the Old Testament, attempts at a summary description of things by their prominent characteristics. They are condensed definitions. And so the Old Testament usage of the "Name" of God is as equivalent to that which God is manifested to be. Hence, in later days—and there are some tendencies that way even in Scripture—in Jewish literature "the Name" came to be a reverential synonym for God Himself. And there are traces that this peculiar usage with regard to the Divine Name was beginning to shape itself in the Church with reference to the Name of Jesus, even at that period in which my text was spoken. For instance, in the fifth chapter we read that the Apostles "departed from the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the Name," and we find at a much later date that missionaries of the Gospel are described by the Apostle John as going forth for the sake of the Name.

The name of Christ, then, is the representation or embodiment of that which Christ is declared to be for us men, and it is that Name, the totality of what He is manifested to be, in which lies all power for healing and for strengthening. The Name, the whole Christ, in His nature, His offices, His work, His Incarnation, His life, His death, Resurrection, session at the right hand of God—it is this Christ whose name made that man strong, and will make us strong. Brethren, let us remember that, while fragments of the Name will have fragmentary power, as the curative virtue that resides in any substance belongs to the smallest grain of it, if detached from the mass—whilst fragments of the Name of Christ have power, thanks be to Him, so that no man can have even a very imperfect and rudimentary view of what Jesus Christ is, and does, without getting strength and healing in proportion to the completeness of his conception, yet in order to realise all that He can be and do, a man must take the whole Christ as He is revealed.

The early Church had a symbol for Jesus Christ, a fish, to which they were led because the Greek word for a fish is made up of the initials of the words which they conceived to be the Name. And what was it? "*Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour.*" *Jesus*, humanity; *Christ*, the apex of Revelation, the fulfilment of prophecy, the Anointed Prophet, Priest, and King; *Son of God*, the Divine nature. And all these, the humanity, the Messiahship, the Divinity, found their sphere of activity in the last name, which, without them, would in its fulness have been impossible—*Saviour*. He is not such a Saviour as He may be to

each of us unless our conception of the Name grasps these three things: the humanity, the Messiahship, the Divinity. "The Name has made this man strong."

II.—Notice how the power of the Name comes to operate.

Now, if you will observe the language of my text you will note that Peter says, as it would appear, the same thing twice over. "His Name, through faith in His Name, hath made this man strong." And then, as if he were saying something else, he adds what seems to be the same thing: "Yea! the faith which is by Him hath given him this perfect soundness."

Now, note that in the first of these two statements nothing appears except the man, the "Name," and "faith." I take it, though of course it may be questionable, that that clause refers to the man's faith, and that we have in it the intentional exclusion of the human workers, and are presented with only the two parties really concerned—at the one end the Name, at the other end this man made strong. And the link of connection between the two in this clause is faith—that is, the man's trust. But then, if we come to the next clause, we find that although Peter has just previously disclaimed all merit in the cure, yet there is a sense in which somebody's faith, working as from without, *gave* to the man "this perfect soundness." And it seems very natural to me to understand that here, where human faith is represented as being, in some subordinate sense, the bestower of the thing which really the Name had bestowed, we have the faith of the human miracle-worker or medium referred to. Peter's faith did give,

but Peter only gave what he had received through faith. And so let all the praise be given to the water, and none to the cup.

Whether that be a fair interpretation of the words of my text, with their singular and apparently meaningless tautology or no, at all events the principle which is involved in the explanation is one that I wish to dwell upon briefly now; and that is that in order for the Name, charged and supercharged with healing and strengthening power as it is, to come into operation, there must be a twofold trust.

The healer, the medium of healing, must have faith in the Name. Yes! of course. In all regions the first requisite, the one indispensable condition, of a successful propagandist is enthusiastic confidence in what he promulgates. "That man will go far," said a cynical politician about one of his rivals, "he believes every word he says." And that is the condition always of getting other people to believe them. Faith is contagious; men catch from other people's tongues the accent of conviction. If one wants to enforce any opinion upon others, the first condition is that he shall be utterly self-oblivious; and when he is manifestly saying, as the Apostles in this context did, "do not fix your eyes on us, as though we were doing anything," then hearts will bow before him, as the trees of the wood are bowed by the wind.

If that is true in all regions, it is eminently true in regard to religion. For what we want there most is not to be instructed, but to be impressed. Most of us have, lying dormant in the bedchamber and infirmary of our brains, convictions which only need to be woken

up to revolutionise our lives. Now one of the most powerful ways of waking them is contact with any man in whom they are awake. So all successful teachers and messengers of Jesus Christ have had this characteristic in common, however unlike each other they have been. The divergencies of temperament, of moods, of point of view, of method of working which prevailed even in the little group of Apostles, and distinguished, broadly, Paul from Peter, Peter from James, and Paul and Peter and James from John, are only types of what has been repeated ever since. Get together the great missionaries of the Cross, and you would have the most extraordinary collection of miscellaneous idiosyncrasies that the world ever saw, and they would not understand each other, as some of them wofully misunderstood each other when here together. But there was one characteristic in them all, a flaming earnestness of belief in the power of the Name. And so it did not matter much, if at all, what their divergencies were. Each of them was fitted for the Master's use.

And so, brethren, here is the reason—I do not say the only reason, but the main one, and that which most affects us—for the slow progress, and even apparent failure, of Christianity. It has fallen into the hands of a Church that does not half believe its own Gospel. By reason of formality and ceremonial and sacerdotalism and a lazy kind of expectation that, somehow or other, the benefits of Christ's love can come to men apart from their own personal faith in Him, the Church has largely ceased to anticipate that great things can be done by its utterance of the

Name. And if you have, I do not say ministers, or teachers, or official proclaimers, or Sunday-school teachers, or the like, but I say if you have a *Church* that is honeycombed with doubt, and from which the strength and flood tide of faith has in many cases ebbed away, why, it may go on uttering its formal proclamations of the Name till the Day of Judgment, and all that will come of it will be—"the man in whom the devils were leaped upon them, and overcame them, and said—as he had a good right to say—Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?" You cannot kindle a fire with snowballs. If the town crier goes into a quiet corner of the market-place and rings his bell apologetically, and gives out his message in a whisper, it is no wonder if nobody listens. And that is the way in which too many so-called Christian teachers and communities hold forth the Name, as if begging pardon of the world for being so narrow and old-fashioned as to believe in it still.

And no less necessary is faith on the other side. The recipient must exercise trust. This lame man, no doubt, like the other that Paul looked at in a similar case, had faith to be healed. That was the length of his tether. He believed that he was going to have his legs made strong; and they were made strong accordingly. If he had believed more, he would have got more. Let us hope that he did get more, because he believed more, some day after. But in the meantime the Apostles' faith was not enough to cure him; and it is not enough for you that Jesus Christ—should be standing with all His power at your elbow, and that, earnestly and enthusiastically, some of Christ's

messengers may press upon you the acceptance of Him as a Saviour. He is no good in the world to you, and never will be, unless you have the personal faith that knits you to Him.

It cannot be otherwise. Depend upon it, if Jesus Christ could save everybody without terms and conditions at all, He would be only too glad to do it, But it cannot be done. The nature of His work, and the sort of blessings that He brings by His work, are such as that it is an impossibility that any man should receive them unless he has that trust which, beginning with the acceptance by the understanding of Christ as Saviour, passes on to the assent of the will, and the outgoing of the heart, and the yielding of the whole nature to Him. How can a truth do any good to a man that does not believe in it? How is it possible that, if you do not take the medicine, it will work? How can you expect to see, unless you open your eyes? How do you propose to have your blood purified, if you do not fill your lungs with air? Is it any use to have gas fittings in your house, if they are not connected with the main? Will a water tap run in your sculleries, if there is no pipe that joins it with the source of supply? My dear friend, these rough illustrations are only approximations to the absolute impossibility that Christ can help, heal, or save any man without the man's personal faith. "Whosoever believeth" is no arbitrary limitation, but is inseparable from the very nature of the salvation given.

III.—And now, lastly, note the effects of the power of the Name.

The Apostle puts in two separate clauses what, in

the case in hand, was really one thing—"hath made this man strong," and "hath given him perfect soundness." Ah, we can part the two, cannot we? There is the disease, the disease of an alienated heart, of a perverted will, of a swollen self, all of which we need to have cured and checked before we can do right. And there is weakness, the impotence to do what is good, "how to perform I find not," and we need to be strengthened as well as cured. There is only one thing that will do these, and that is that Christ's power, aye, and Christ's own life, should pass, as it will pass if we trust Him, into our foulness and precipitate all the impurity—into our weakness and infuse strength. A reed shaken with the wind, and without substance or solidity to resist, may be placed in what they call a petrifying well, and, by the infiltration of stony substance into its structure, may be turned into a rigid mass, like a little bar of iron. So, if Christ comes into my poor, weak, tremulous nature, there will be an infiltration into the very substance of my being of a present power which will make me strong.

My brother, you and I need, first and foremost, the healing, and then the strength-giving power, which we never find in its completeness anywhere but in Christ, and which we shall always find in Him.

And now notice, Jesus Christ does not make half cures—"this *perfect* soundness." If any man, in contact with Him, is but half delivered from his infirmities and purged from his sins, it is not because the power is inadequate, but because the faith is defective.

Christ's cures should be visible to all around. A man's own testimony is not the most satisfactory. Peter appeals to the bystanders. "You have seen him lying here for years, a motionless lump of mendicancy at the Temple's gate. Now you see him walking and leaping and praising God. Is it a cure, or is it not?" You professing Christians, would you like to stand that test, to empanel a jury of people that have no sympathy with your religion, in order that they might decide whether you were healed and strengthened or not? It is a good thing for us when the world bears witness that Jesus Christ's power has come into us, and made us what we are.

And so, dear friends, I lay all these thoughts on your hearts. Christ's gift is amply sufficient to deliver us from all evils of weakness, sickness, incapacity: to endue us with all gifts of spiritual and immortal strength. But, while the limit of what Christ gives is His boundless wealth, the limit of what you possess is your faith. The rainfall comes down in the same copiousness on rock and furrow, but it runs off the one, having stimulated no growth and left no blessing, and it sinks into the other and quickens every dormant germ into life which will one day blossom into beauty. We are all of us either rock or soil, and which we are depends on the reality, the firmness, and the force of our faith in Christ. He Himself has laid down the principle on which He bestows His gifts when He says, "According to thy faith be it unto thee."

XVIII.

Peter's List of Valuables.

"MUCH more precious than gold that perisheth."—1 PETER i. 7.



ETER is very fond of this word "precious." He uses it more frequently than all the other New Testament writers, with the exception of John in the Revelation, where, however, it is only employed in reference to things of material value, such as jewels and costly woods. Paul uses it only once, and in a similar connection, speaking about "gold, silver, and precious stones." James employs it once in regard of the fruits of the earth; and all the other instances of its use are in Peter's writings. It is his stock epithet, not discriminating the various excellences of the things to which he applies it, but, in a naive and beautifully simple fashion, extolling their worth.

Here are the cases in which he uses it. First, in my text, about the process by which Christian faith is tested; then about the blood of Jesus Christ; then, in a quotation from Isaiah, about Christ Himself as the corner-stone. These three are the instances in the first Epistle. In the second we find two, where he speaks of "like precious faith" and of "exceeding great and precious promises."

I may just note in passing that the persistency of the use of this characteristic word and its cognate in the second Epistle is a little morsel of evidence in favour of the contested genuineness of that Epistle. It does not carry us very far, but it may stand for something.

Now, my purpose in this sermon is to gather together these various applications of this one epithet. In the mass they give us Peter's catalogue of the Christian's treasures, and if we laid them to heart they would rectify our estimates and revolutionise our lives. I classify them a little differently from the order in which they occur in the letters.

I.—I ask you, first, to take this general principle, that our true treasures are all contained in, and clustered round, the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Now, in order to estimate the value of a thing, the first necessity is a correct standard. And this is the misery of men, that, whilst they are prepared to give abundant thought to the means whereby they may compass the ends that they select, so few of them have given anything like adequate, sober, and deliberate consideration to the question of what these ends should be. If we would only fairly set ourselves to settle this question of what is good, and what are the relative degrees of good in the different aims that we can set before us, there would be fewer tragedies in life.

I wonder how many men and women in this congregation have given one serious hour to the question of what really is of value to them; and how many of us could say, "To the best of my ability I have looked at life steadily and completely, and I have

come to the reasoned, deliberate conclusion that so-and-so is the course which offers to me the fairest prospect of highest and permanent good." Have you done it, brother? Or have you let yourself, like so tragically many of us, be drifted into a course of life by impulse, accident, example, bodily needs, or like trivial causes?

Now, if we are seeking for a standard of value, surely the following points are very plain. Our true treasure must be such as helps us towards the highest ends for which we are fitted by our make. It must be such as satisfies our deepest needs; it must be such as meets our whole nature; and it must be such as cannot be wrenched from us. These things are as plain as A B C. Ay, and men in crowds, who acknowledge them because they cannot dispute them, are living in flagrant contradiction of every one of them. I do not want to undervalue lower and relative good of any kind, or to preach an over-strained contempt of material, transient, and partial blessing. Competence and wealth, gold and what gold buys, and what it keeps away, are good. High above them we rank the treasures of a cultivated mind, of a refined taste, of eyes that see the beauty of God's fair creation. Above these we rank the priceless treasures of pure, reciprocated human love. But none of them, nor all of them put together, meet our tests, simple and obvious as they are. They help us but a little way towards our goal. They do not satisfy the whole or the depths of our natures; but ever there is the hungry heart, or, worse, the atrophy of the best longings of our souls. You can no more fill a man's nature

with creatures and creatural bliss than a child, with its little wheelbarrow and spade, can fill the bed of the ocean by shovelling and tilting barrowfuls of sand into it. Only God can fill a soul. Manchester men do not need to be told that capitalists may become paupers. All of us who have lived long enough in this Lancashire have seen plenty of mills and warehouses "change hands," as they say, and their possessors vanish into poverty. And death comes, and takes all the treasures out of the powerless fingers, and unclasps the linked hands of dear ones.

So, dear brethren, perhaps Peter is right after all, when he points us in a wholly different direction for the true precious things. He numbers in the first rank, as in themselves intrinsically and always precious beyond the estimate of men, Christ, Christ's blood, Christ's promises.

"Christ is precious." Now, the word that he employs there is slightly different from that which occurs in the other verses. And since it is slightly different there is just a shade of difference of meaning in it, which is brought out by observing that the speaker in the original words of the prophet is God Himself. It is the preciousness in God's sight of the stone which *He* "lays in Zion" that is glanced at in the epithet. I must not dwell upon that; but let me just suggest to you how the preciousness of His beloved Son, in the eyes of the Father who gave Him, enhances the preciousness of the gift to us. God obeys the law which He lays upon His servants; and He "will not give" to us "that which costs Him nothing." His recognition of the preciousness of the

Son whom He did not spare invests the work of Christ with a heart-melting aspect and the mystery of a Divine surrender.

But Christ is precious to us. Yes, if we know ourselves and what we want; if we know Him and what He gives; if our emptiness feels that it is filled by His fulness, as a concavity may be rounded so as to receive, and embrace, and touch at every point, a convexity. Do you want wisdom? He is the wisdom of God. Do you seek power? He is the power of God. Do you long for joy? He will give you His own. Do you weary for peace? "My peace I leave with you." Do you hunger for righteousness? "He of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness." Do you need fulness and abundance? In Him dwells all the fulness of God; and "of His fulness have all we received." Whatever good any soul seeks, Christ is the highest good, and is all good. And so unto us believing the preciousness of Jesus will surely come. Ah, brethren, let us turn our hearts away from false treasures and lay hold on Him who is the true Riches.

Further, Christ's blood is precious. Peter believed in Christ's atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, and of each single soul therein; and I venture to more than doubt whether any man comes to apprehend, as it may be apprehended, the worth of Jesus Christ, who has not apprehended the worth of His blood. If you strike that aspect and element out of the work of our Lord, what remains, precious as it is, does not seem to me to satisfy human necessities so completely as to make Him the all-sufficient and single treasure and

riches of men's souls. I suppose that to say so is considered nowadays to be old-fashioned and narrow. The more is the pity! Brethren, the precious Christ is precious because of His blood shed for the remission of sins, and because in His blood, which is His life, flowing in our veins by the faith that partakes of Him, there is a power which will make our lives pure and gracious and good, as derived from, and kindred with Him. And, as I believe, only they, who in full faith recognise the fact that the death of Christ is the life of the world, can understand or re-echo the raptures of confidence with which apostles and saints exalt His preciousness and magnify His great name. Christ Himself is our true treasure, and in that treasure not the least precious of its contents is the mighty act by which, on the Cross, He takes away the sins of the world. I beseech you to ask yourselves whether, in your conception of Christianity, and what it is and does for the world, you can, with full consent of understanding and heart, accord not only with Peter's extolling of the precious Christ, but with his magnifying the worth of the precious blood of Christ as of "a Lamb without blemish and without spot."

And then there is a third precious thing, clustering round and flowing from Jesus Christ and His work—and that is, the "exceeding great and precious promises," which are given to us "that by them we may be partakers of a Divine nature."

I presume that the promises referred to by the Apostle are largely, if not exclusively, those which have reference to what we call the future state. And

they are precious because they come straight to meet one of the deepest needs of humanity, often neglected, but always there—an ache, if not a conscious need. What about that dark, dim beyond? Is there any solid ground in it? Is there any place on which a firm foot may be planted? any fast holding-ground in which the anchor of our souls may be fixed without dragging? Is there anything that we can know and believe and trust to? anything which we can be so sure of that it has a right to influence our lives and to press in amongst the seeming solidities of the present? or is it but shadow and cloud-wrack, or, as people say, "subjective impressions" thrown upon the black curtain beyond? Christ comes with the answer, "I am the Resurrection and the Life; he that believeth on Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." Then it is not mist; then I can fling my grappling-iron into it, and it will hold, and I can hold on to it. Then I can be sure of the farthest point of boundless Time which men call Eternity; as sure as I am—I was going to say, of the next moment, but I can be surer—as sure as I am of yesterday. For Christ's future is as fixed as my past. So, brethren, His promises are precious. They are not coin, they are cheques with a good Name on them; and that is quite as reliable and as true wealth as if you had the shining metal in your hands to-day which they represent.

Thus, dear friends, Christ Himself, and in Christ Christ's blood, and from Christ's lips Christ's promises—these are the true treasures which we should seek to amass and call our own. "My God shall supply all

your need, according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

II.—If so, that which puts us in possession of the precious things is itself precious.

So the Apostle speaks, in his second Epistle, about "like precious faith," using a compound word, which, however, is substantially identical with the simple expression in the other cases. Now, I am not going to diverge from my present purpose to say anything about that very significant little addition, "*like* precious faith," except just to drop a passing remark that, seeing that it occurs in the salutation at the beginning of the letter, it presents us with a very beautiful instance of the Apostle's humble and joyful identification with himself of all those, of whatever nationality, degree in life, or attainment in Christianity, who were trusting in Jesus Christ. He, the Apostle of Jesus, addresses the whole multitude of believers, he, the Jew, addresses the whole multitude of Gentiles, as having obtained "like precious faith with us."

But I pass from that for the purpose of making one observation, and that is, that the only preciousness of that faith, which the New Testament magnifies so greatly, is that it brings us into possession of the things that are intrinsically precious. I believe that hosts of people in all our congregations who have had Christian teaching dinned into their ears ever since they were babes have but the haziest notion, both of what the New Testament means by faith, and of why it magnifies it so much. If only you would understand that it is nothing more than simple trust, and

that the only reason why it is worth anything is because it gives you the possession of that which is worth everything, mountains of misapprehension and clouds of mist would be cleared away from the whole system of Christian teaching ; and you would come to understand how it was no arbitrary appointment, the reasons of which were not discernible, but a necessity, arising from the very nature of the case, that the only way by which a man could obtain possession of the Christ, "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," was by the simple act of opening his heart and saying, "Come in, Lord, and fill me with Thyself." That is the preciousness, and it is the only preciousness that attaches to faith.

Suppose a door worth half a crown ; yes ! but it is the door of a storehouse full of bullion. Here is a bit of lead pipe, worth twopence. ; yes, but through it comes the water that keeps a besieged city alive. And so your faith, worth nothing in itself, is worth everything as the means by which you lay hold of the durable riches and righteousness of Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, cherish it. A cultivated mind is a treasure because it is the key to many treasures. Refined tastes are treasures because they bring us into possession of lofty gifts. *Æsthetic* sensibilities are precious because they make our own a pure and ennobling pleasure. And, for precisely the same reason, high above the cultivated understanding, and refined tastes, and the artistic sense, ay, and even above the loving heart that twines its tendrils round another heart as loving, we rank the faith which joins

us to Christ. It is like a hand uplifted, and with open fingers, eager to close round the outstretched hand in which alone is strength. If Christ, His blood, His promises, are precious, then in the second rank of a derived preciousness is the faith which clasps and keeps Him and them.

III.—If so, the process which strengthens that faith is precious.

My nominal text speaks about “the trial of your faith” as being “much more precious than of gold that perisheth though it be tried with fire.” There are ambiguities about the phrase, and this is not the place, nor is there now time, to say a word about these. Suffice it to say, I accept the common understanding of the words as the correct one, and suppose that Peter meant that the process by which faith is tested, purified, and perfected is a precious treasure. Ah, that is a strange reversal of our lazy and sense-bound estimates, but it is plainly true, if what I have been saying in the previous part of this sermon is true. If Christ and what pertains to Him are real wealth, and if our faith is the means of our coming into possession of our property, then everything that tightens our grasp upon Him, and increases our capacity of receiving Him, is valuable.

Let us lay that to heart, brethren, and it changes all our estimates of this world's mistaken ill and good. Let us lay that to heart, and it interprets much. We do not understand life until we have got rid of the prejudice that enjoyment, or any lower thing, is the object of it. Let us understand that the deepest meaning of all our experience here is discipline, and

we have come within sight of the solution of most of our perplexities. Education, character-building, the widening of our capacity to desire and to receive God—that is what we are sent into the world for, and what we are schooled and tormented and bothered and gladdened for. Sorrow and joy, light and darkness, summer and winter, sunshine and storm, life and death, gain and loss, failures and successes—they all have the one end, that we may be partakers of the wealth of His holiness. So, brethren, take the lamp of that simple truth in your hands, and the dark places of life will be less dark, and you will understand that not enjoyment and not sorrow, but God-likeness and the full possession of Jesus Christ is the purpose of all.

Lapidaries will tell you that the most precious pearls are black. The white ones strike the vulgar eye, but they are worth less than the dark ones. If you have wisely dealt with your sorrows, they are your truest treasures. Take care that you do not waste them; take care that you get out of them all that they are meant to bring.

And, dear brethren, let us try to clear our minds of the delusions of this world, and to rectify our estimates of true good. A very perverted standard prevails, and we are too apt to fall in with it. Many of us are no wiser than savages who will exchange gold for trash, and barter away fertile lands for a stand of old muskets or a case of fiery rum. Think of yourselves, your nature, your wants, your aching hearts, your sure departure from life, and the eternity that is before you. Think of your necessities in their depth, their

sweep, their duration. Listen to Jesus Christ counselling you to buy of Him gold tried in the fire. Turn away from the fairy gold which by daylight will be seen to be but a heap of yellow, fading leaves, and cling in faith, which is precious, to Him who is priceless, and in whom the poorest will find riches that cannot be corrupted nor lost for ever.



XIX.

How to Secure a Prosperous Voyage.

"AND after Paul had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel unto them. Therefore we came with a straight course."—ACTS xvi. 10.



HIS book of the Acts is careful to point out how each fresh step in the extension of the Church's work was directed and commanded by Jesus Christ Himself. Thus Philip was sent by specific injunction to "join himself" to the chariot of the Ethiopian statesman. Thus Peter on the house-top at Joppa, looking out over the waters of the western sea, had the vision of the great sheet, knit at the four corners. And thus Paul, in singularly similar circumstances, in the little seaport of Troas, looking out over the narrower ocean which separates Asia from Europe, had the vision of the man of Macedonia, with his cry, "Come over and help us!" The whole narrative before us bears upon the one point, that Christ Himself directs the expansion of His kingdom. And there never was a more fateful moment than that at which the Gospel, in the person of the

Apostle, crossed the seas, and effected a lodgment in the progressive quarter of the world.

Now, what I wish to do is to note how Paul and his little company behaved themselves when they had received Christ's commandment. For I think there are lessons worth the gathering to be found there. There was no doubt about the vision; the question was what it meant. So, note three stages. First, careful consideration, with one's own common sense, of what God wants us to do—"Assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us." Then, let no grass grow under our feet—"immediate" obedience—"Straightway we endeavoured to go into Macedonia." And, then, patient pondering and instantaneous submission get the reward—"We came with a straight course." He gave the winds and the waves charge concerning them. Now, there are three lessons for us. Taken together, they are patterns of what ought to be in our experience, and will be, if the conditions are complied with.

I.—First, careful consideration.

Paul had no doubt that what he saw was a vision from Christ, and not a mere dream of the night, born of the reverberation of waking thoughts and anxieties, that took the shape of the plaintive cry of the man of Macedonia. But then the next step was to be quite sure of what the vision meant. And so, wisely, he does not make up his mind himself, but calls in the three men that were with him. And what a significant little group it was! There were Timothy, Silas, and Luke—Silas, from Jerusalem; Timothy, half a Gentile; Luke, altogether a Gentile; and Paul himself—and

these three shook the world. They get together, and they talk the matter over. The word of my text rendered "assuredly gathering" is a picturesque one. It literally means "laying things together." They set various facts side by side, or, as we say in our colloquial idiom, "They put this and that together." And so they came to understand what the vision meant.

What had they to help them to understand it? Well, they had this fact, that in all the former part of their journey they had been met by hindrances; that their path had been hedged up here, there, and everywhere. Paul set out from Antioch, meaning a quiet little tour of visitation amongst the churches that had been already established. Jesus Christ meant Philippi, and Antioch, and Corinth, and Ephesus, before Paul got back again. So we read in an earlier portion of the chapter that the Spirit of Jesus forbade them to speak the Word in one region, and checked and hindered them when, baffled, they tried to go to another. There, then, remained only one other road open to them, and that led to the coast. Thus, putting together their hindrances and their stimuli, they came to the conclusion that the two unitedly said plainly, "Go across the sea, and preach the Word there."

Now it is a very commonplace and homely piece of teaching to remind you that time is not wasted in making quite sure of the meaning of providences which seem to declare the will of God, before we begin to act. But the commonest duties are very often neglected; and we preachers, I think, would very often do more good by hammering at common-

place themes than by bringing out original and fresh ones. And so I venture to say a word about the immense importance, to Christian life and Christian service, of this preliminary step ; "assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us." What have we to do, in order to be quite sure of God's intention for us ?

Well, the first thing seems to me to make quite sure that we want to know it, and that we do not want to force our intentions upon Him, and then to plume ourselves upon being obedient to His call, when we are only doing what we like. There is a vast deal of unconscious insincerity in us all ; and especially in regard to Christian work there is an enormous amount of it. People will say, "Oh, I have such a strong impulse in a given direction, to do certain kinds of Christian service, that I am quite sure that it is God's will." How are you sure ? A strong impulse may be a temptation from the Devil as well as a call from God. And men who simply act on untested impulses, even the most benevolent, which spring directly from large Christian principles, may be making deplorable mistakes. It is not enough to have pure motives. It is useless to say, "Such and such a course of action is clearly the result of the truths of the Gospel." That may be all perfectly true, and yet the course may not be the course for you. For there may be practical considerations, which do not come into our view unless we carefully think about them, which forbid us to take such a path. So, remember, strong impulses are not guiding lights ; nor is it enough to vindicate our pursuing some mode of Christian service that it is in accordance with the principles of the Gospel. "Circum-

stances alter cases" is a very homely old saying ; but if Christian people would only bring the common-sense to bear upon their religious life which they need to bring to bear upon their business life, unless they are going into the Gazette, there would be less waste work in the Christian Church than there is to-day. I do not want less zeal ; I want that the reins of the fiery steed shall be kept well in hand. The difference between a fanatic, who is a fool, and an enthusiast, who is a wise man, is that the one brings calm reason to bear, and an open-eyed consideration of circumstances all round ; and the other sees but one thing at a time, and shuts his eyes, like a bull in a field, and charges at that. So let us be sure, to begin with, that we want to know what God wants us to do ; and that we are not palming our wishes upon Him, and calling them His providences.

Then there is another plain, practical consideration that comes out of this story, and that is, Do not be above being taught by failures and hindrances. You know the old proverb, "It is waste time to flog a dead horse." There is not a little well-meant work flung away, because it is expended on obviously hopeless efforts to revivify, perhaps, some moribund thing or to continue, perhaps, in some old, well-worn rut, instead of striking out into a new path. Paul was full of enthusiasm for the evangelisation of Asia Minor, and he might have said a great deal about the importance of going to Ephesus. He tried to do it, but Christ said, No ; and Paul did not knock his head against the stone wall that lay between him and the accomplishment of his purpose, but he gave it up and tried

another tack. He next wished to go up into Bithynia, and he might have said a great deal about the needs of the people by the Black Sea ; but again down came the barrier, and he had once more to learn the lesson, “ Not as I will, but as Thou wilt.” He was not above being taught by his failures. Some of us are ; and it is very difficult, and needs a great deal of Christian wisdom and unselfishness, to distinguish between hindrances in the way of work which are meant to evoke larger efforts, and hindrances which are meant to say, “ Try another path, and do not waste time here any longer.”

But if we wish supremely to know God’s will, He will help us to distinguish between these two kinds of difficulties. Someone has said, “ Difficulties are things to be overcome.” Yes, but not always. They very often are, and we should thank God for them then ; but they sometimes are God’s warnings to us to go by another road. So we need discretion, and patience, and suspense of judgment to be brought to bear upon all our purposes and plans.

Then, of course, I need not remind you that the way to get light is to seek it in the Book, and in communion with Him whom the Book reveals to us, as the true Word of God : “ He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” So, careful consideration is a preliminary to all good Christian work. And, if you can, talk to some Timothy and Silas and Luke about your course, and do not be above taking a brother’s advice.

II.—The next step is immediate submission.

When they had assuredly gathered that the Lord had called them "immediately"—there is great virtue in that one little word—"we endeavoured to go into Macedonia." Delayed obedience is the brother—and, if I may mingle metaphors, sometimes the father—of disobedience. It sometimes means simple feebleness of conviction, indolence, and a general lack of fervour. It means, very often, a reluctance to do the thing that lies plainly before us. And, dear brethren, as I have said about the former lesson, so I say about this. The homely virtue, which we all know to be indispensable to success in common daily life and commercial undertakings, is no less indispensable to all vigour of Christian life and to all nobleness of Christian service. We have no hours to waste; the time is short. In the harvest-field, especially when it is getting near the end of the week, and the Sunday is at hand, there is little leisure and little tolerance of slow workers. And for us the fields are white, the labourers are few, the Lord of the harvest is impaertive, and the sun is hurrying to the west, and the sickles will have to be laid down before long. So "*immediately we endeavoured.*"

Delayed duty is present discomfort. As long as a man has a conscience, so long will he be restless and uneasy until he has, as the Quakers say, "cleared himself of his burden," and done what he knows he ought to do, and got done with it. Delayed obedience means wasted possibilities of service, and so is ever to be avoided. The more disagreeable anything is which is plainly a duty, the more reason

there is for doing it right away. "I made haste, and delayed not, but made haste to keep Thy commandments."

Did you ever count how many "*straightways*" there are in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel? If you have not, will you do it when you go home; and notice how they come in? In the story of Christ's opening ministry every fresh incident is tacked on to the one before it, in that chapter, by that same word "*straightway*." "*Straightway*" He does that; "*anon*" He does this; "*immediately*" He does the other thing. All is one continuous stream of acts of service. The Gospel of Mark is the Gospel of the servant, and it sets forth the pattern to which all Christian service ought to be conformed.

So, if we take Jesus Christ for our example, unhaunting and unresting in the work of the Lord, we shall let no moment pass burdened with undischarged duty; and we shall find that all the moments are few enough for the discharge of the duties incumbent upon us.

III.—So, lastly, careful consideration and unhesitating obedience lead to a straight course.

Well, it is not so always, but it is so generally. There is a wonderful power in diligent doing of God's known will to smooth away difficulties and avoid troubles. I do not, of course, mean that a man who thus lives, patiently ascertaining, and then promptly doing what God would have him do, has any miraculous exemption from the ordinary sorrows and trials of life. But sure I am that a very, very large proportion of all the hindrances and disappointments, storms and

quicksands, calms which prevent progress, and head-winds that beat in our faces, are directly the products of our negligence in one or other of these two respects, and that although by no means absolutely, yet to an extent that we should not believe if we had not the experience of it, the wish to do God's will, and the doing of it with our might when we know what it is, have a talismanic power in calming the seas and bringing us to the desired haven.

But though this is not always absolutely true in regard of outward things, it is, without exception or limitation, true in regard of the inward life. For, if my supreme will is to do God's will, then nothing which is His will, and comes to me because it is, can be a hindrance in my doing that.

As an old proverb says, travelling merchants can never be out of their road. And a Christian man whose path is simple obedience to the will of God can never be turned from that path by whatever hindrances may affect his outward life. So, in deepest truth, there is always a calm voyage for the men whose eyes are open to discern, and whose hands are swift to fulfil, the commandments of their Father in heaven. For them all winds blow them to their port; for them "all things work together for good"; with them God's servants who hearken to the voice of His commandments, and are His ministers to do His pleasure, can never be other than in amity and alliance. He who is God's servant is the world's master. "All things are yours if ye are Christ's."

So, brethren, careful study of providences and

visions, of hindrances and stimuluses, careful setting of our lives side by side with the Master's, and a swift delight in doing the will of the Lord, will secure for us, in inmost truth, a prosperous voyage till all storms shall be hushed. "Then are they glad because they be quiet ; so He bringeth them to their desired haven."



XX.

Love makes Suns.

"LET them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might."—JUDGES v. 31.



THESE are the closing words of Deborah, the great warrior-prophetess of Israel. They are in singular contrast with the tone of fierce enthusiasm for battle which throbs through the rest of the chant, and with its stern approval of the deed of Jael when she slew Sisera. Here, in its last notes, we have an anticipation of the highest and best truths of the Gospel. "Let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might." If we think of the singer, of the age and the occasion of the song, such purely spiritual, lofty words must seem very remarkable.

I.—Note, then, first of all, how here we have a penetrating insight into the essence of religion.

This woman had been nourished upon a more or less perfect edition of what we know as the "Mosaic Law." Her faith had been fed by forms. She moved amidst a world full of the cruelties and dark conceptions of a mysterious Divine power which torture

heathenism apart from Christianity. She had forced her way through all that, and laid hold of the vital centre. And there, away out amidst cruelty and murder, amidst the unutterable abominations and terrors of heathenism, in the centre of a rigid system of ceremonial and retaliation, the woman's heart spoke out, and taught her what was the great commandment. Prophetess she was, fighter she was, she could burst into triumphant approval of Jael's bloody deed ; and yet with the same lips could speak this profound word. She had learned that "Thou shalt *love* the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind," summed up all duty, and was the beginning of all good in man. That precept found an echo in her heart. Whatever part in her religious development may have been played by the externalisms of ceremonial, she had pierced to the core of religion. Advanced modern critics admit the antiquity of Deborah's song, and this closing stanza witnesses to the existence, at that early period, of a highly spiritual conception of the bond between God and man. Deborah had got as far, in a moment of exaltation and insight, as the teaching of the Apostle John, although her thought was strangely blended with the fierceness of the times in which she lived. Her approval of Jael's deed, by no means warrants our approving it, but we may thankfully see that though she felt the fierce throbbing of desire for vengeance, she also felt this— " Them that *love* Him ; that is the Alpha and the Omega of all."

Our love must depend on our knowledge. Deborah's

knowledge was a mere skeleton outline as compared with ours. Contrast the fervour of emotional affection that manifestly throbbed in her heart with the poor, cold pulsations which we dignify by the name of love, and the contrast may put us to shame. There is a religion of fear which dominates hundreds of professing Christians in this city of ours. There is a religion of duty, in which there is no delight, which has many adherents amongst us. There is a religion of form, which contents itself with the externals of Christianity, and that is the religion of many men and women in this audience now. And I may further say, there is a religion of faith, in its narrower and imperfect sense, which lays hold of and believes a body of Christian truth, and has never passed through faith into love. Not he who "believes that God is," and comes to Him with formal service and an alienated or negligent heart ; not he who recognises the duty of worship, and discharges it because his conscience pricks him, but has no buoyancy within bearing him upwards towards the object of his love ; not he who cowers before the dark shadow which some call God ; but he who, knowing, trusts, and who, knowing and trusting the love which God hath to us, pulses back the throbs of a recipient heart, and loves Him in return —he, and he only, is a worshipper. Let us learn the lesson that Deborah learnt below the palm-trees of Lapidoth, and if we want to understand what a religious man is, recognise that he is a man who loves God.

II.—Further, note the grand conception of the character which such a love produces.

"Let them be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might." Think of the fierce eastern sun, with "sunbeams like swords," that springs up from the east, and rushes to the zenith, and "nothing is hid from the heat thereof"—a sun the like of which we, in our cloudy skies, never see nor feel, but which, to the Oriental, is the very emblem of splendour and of continuous, victorious power. There are two things here, radiance and energy, light and might.

"As the sun when he goeth forth in his strength." Deborah was a "prophetess," and people say, "What did she prophesy?" Well, she prophesied the heart of religion—as I have tried to show you—in reference to its essence, and, as one sees by this phrase, in reference to its effects. What is her word but a partial anticipation of Christ's saying, "Ye are the light of the world"; and of His disciple's utterance, "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light"?

It is too plain to need any talking about, that the direct tendency of what we venture to call love to God, meaning thereby the turning of the whole nature to Him, in aspiration, admiration, longing for likeness, and practical imitation, is to elevate, ennable, and illuminate the whole character. It was said about one woman that "to love her was an education." That was exaggeration; but it is below the truth about God. The true way to refine and elevate and educate is to cultivate love to God. And when we get near to Him, and hold by Him, and are continually occupied with Him; when our being is one continual aspiration after union with Him, and

we experience the glow and rapture included in the simple word "love," then it cannot but be that we shall be like Him.

That is what Paul meant when he said, "Now are ye light in the Lord." Union with Him illuminates. The true radiance of saintly character will come in the measure in which we are in fellowship with Jesus Christ. Deborah's astronomy was not her strong point. The sun shines by its own light. We are planets, and are darkness in ourselves, and it is only the reflection of the central sun that ever makes us look silvery white and radiant before men. But though it be derived, it is none the less our light, if it has passed into us, as it surely will, and if it streams out from us, as it no less surely will, in the measure in which love to God dominates our whole lives.

If that is so, dear brethren, is not the shortest and the surest way to have our faces shining like that of Moses when he came down from the mountain, or like Stephen's when he saw the heavens opened, to keep near Jesus Christ? It is slow work to hammer bits of ore out of the rock with a chisel and a mallet. Pitch the whole mass into the furnace, and the metal will come out separated from the dross. Get up the heat, and the light, which is the consequence of the heat, will take care of itself. In the Lord ye shall be light.

Is Deborah's aspiration fulfilled about me? Let each of us ask that. "As the sun when he goeth forth in his strength"—would anybody say that about my Christian character? Why not? Only because the springs have run low within is the

stream low through the meadows. Only because the love is cold is the light feeble.

There is another thought here. There is power in sunlight as well as radiance. On that truth the prophetess especially lays a finger; "as the sun when he goeth forth in his *strength*." She did not know what we know, that solar energy is the source of all energy on this earth, and that, just as in the deepest spiritual analysis "there is no power but of God," so in the material region we may say that the only force is the force of the sun, which not only stimulates vegetation and brings light and warmth—as the pre-scientific prophetess knew—but in a hundred other ways, unknown to her and known to modern science, is the author of all change, the parent of all life, and the reservoir of all energy.

So we come to this thought: The true love of God is no weak, sentimental thing, such as narrow and sectional piety has often represented it to be, but it is a power which will invigorate the whole of a man, and make him strong and manly as well as gentle and gracious; being, indeed, the parent of all the so-called heroic and of all the so-called saintly virtues.

The sun "goeth forth in his strength," rushing through the heavens to the zenith. As one of the other editions of this metaphor in the Old Testament has it, "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more until the noon tide of the day." That light, indeed, declines, but that fact does not come into view in the metaphor of the progressive growth towards perfection of the man in whom is the

all-conquering might of the true love of Jesus Christ.

Note the context of these words of our text, which, I said, presents so singular a contrast to them. It is a strange thing that so fierce a battle-chant should settle down into such a sweet swan-song as this at the end. It is a strange thing that in the same soul there should throb the delight in battle and the almost delight in murder, and these lofty thoughts. But let us learn the lesson that true love to God means hearty hatred of God's enemy. And it will always have to be militant, and sometimes stern, and what people call fierce. Amidst the amenities and sentimentalities of modern life there is much necessity for remembering that the Apostle of love was a "son of thunder," and that it was the lips which summoned Israel to the fight, and chanted hymns of triumph over the corpses borne down by the rushing Kishon, which also said: "Let them that love Him be as the sun when he shineth forth in his strength." If you love God, you will surely be a strong man as well as an emotional and affectionate Christian.

That energy is to be continuous and progressive. The sun that Deborah saw day by day spring from his station in the east, and climb to his height in the heavens, and ray down his beams, has been doing that for millions of years, and it will probably keep doing it for uncounted periods still. And so the Christian man, with continuity unbroken and progressive brilliance and power, should shine more and more till the unsetting noontide of the day.

III.—That brings me to the last thought, which

passes beyond the limits of the prophetess' vision. Here is a prophecy of which the utterer was unaware.

There is a contrast drawn in the words of our text and in those immediately preceding. "So," says Deborah, after the fierce description of the slaughter of Sisera—"So let all Thine enemies perish, O Lord! but let them that love Thee be as the sun when he shineth in his strength." She contrasts the transiency of the lives that pit themselves against God with the perpetuity that belongs to those which are in harmony with Him. The truth goes further than she probably knew; certainly further than she was thinking when she chanted these words. Let us widen them by other words which use the same metaphor, and say, 'they that be wise"—that is a shallower word than 'them that love Thee"—"they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever." Let us widen and deepen them by sacerdotal words still; for Jesus Christ laid hold of this old metaphor, and said, describing the time when all the enemies shall have perished, and the weeds have been flung out of the vineyard, "Then shall the righteous shine forth like the sun, in the Kingdom of their Father," with a brilliancy that will fill heaven with new galaxies, bright beyond all that we see here amidst the thick atmosphere and mists and clouds of the present life!

Nor need we stop even there, for Jesus Christ not only laid hold of this metaphor in order to describe the eternal glory of the children of the Kingdom, but at the last time that human eyes on earth saw Him;

the glorified Man Christ Jesus is thus described: "His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength." Love always tends to likeness; and love to Christ will bring conformity with Him. The perfect love of heaven will issue in perfect and perpetual assimilation to Him. Science tells us that the light of the sun probably comes from his contraction; and that the process of contraction will go on until, at some point within the bounds of time, though far beyond the measure of our calculations, the sun himself shall die, the ineffectual beams will be paled, and there will be a black orb, with neither life nor light nor power. And *then*, then, and after that for ever, "they that love Him" shall continue to be as that dead sun once was, when he went forth in his lost might.



XXI.

Christ's Question to Each.*

"BELIEVEST thou this? She saith unto him, Yea, Lord."—
JOHN xi. 26, 27.



Each of these annual sermons which I have preached for so long comes round I feel more solemnly the growing probability that it may be the last. Like a man nearing the end of his day's work, I want to make the most of the remaining moments. Whether this is the last sermon of the sort that I shall preach or not, it is certainly the last of the kind that some of you will hear from me, or possibly from anyone.

So, dear friends, I have felt that neither you nor I can afford to waste this hour in considering subjects of secondary interest, appropriate as some of them might be. I wish to come to the main point at once, and to press upon you all, and especially on the younger portion of this audience, the question of your own personal religion.

The words of my text, as you will probably remember, were addressed by our Lord to Martha, as she was writhing in agony over her dead brother. Christ

* Annual Sermon to the Young.

proclaims, with singular calmness and majesty, His character and work as the Resurrection and the Life, and then seeks to draw her from her absorbing sorrow to an effort of faith which shall grasp the truths He proclaims. He flashes out this sudden question, like the swift thrust of a gleaming dagger. It is a demand for credence to His assertion—on His bare word—tremendous as that assertion is. And nobly was the demand met by the as swift, unfaltering answer, “Yea, Lord, I believe” in Thee, and so I believe in Thy word.

Now friends, Jesus Christ is putting the same question to each of us. And I pray that our answers may be Martha's.

I.—Note first the significance of the question.

“This.” What is *this*? The answer will tell us what are the central essential facts, faith in which makes a Christian? Of course the form in which our Lord's previous utterance was cast was coloured by the circumstances under which He spoke, and was so shaped as to meet the momentary exigency. But whilst thus the form is determined by the fact that He was speaking to a heart wrung by separation, and as a preliminary to a mighty act of Resurrection, the essential truths which are so expressed are those which, as I believe, constitute the fundamental truths of Christianity—the very core and heart of the Gospel.

Turn, then, but for a moment, to what immediately precedes my text. Our Lord says three things. First, He asserts His supernatural character and Divine relation to life, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Next, He declares that it is possible for

Him to communicate to dying and to dead men a life which triumphs over death, and laughs at change, and persists through the superficial thing which we christen by the name of Death, unaffected, undiminished, as some sweet spring might gush up in the heart of a salt, solitary sea. And then He declares that the condition on which He, the Life-giver, gives of His immortal life, to dying men, is their trust in Him. These three, His character and work, the gifts of which His hands are full, and the way by which the gifts may be appropriated by us men—these three are, as I take it, the central facts of Christianity. "Believest thou this?"

The question comes to us all; and in these days of unsettlement it is well to have some clear understanding of what is the "irreducible minimum" of Christian teaching. I take it that it lies here. There are two opposite errors which, like all opposite errors, are bolted together, and revolve round a common centre. The one of them is the extreme conservative tendency which regards every pin and bolt of the tabernacle as if it were equally sacred with the altar and the ark. And the other is the tendency which christens itself "liberal and progressive," and which is always ready to exchange old lamps, though they have burnt brightly in the past, for new ones that are as yet only glittering metal and untried. In these days, when it is a presumption against any opinion that our fathers believed it (an error which young people are most prone to fall into), and when, by the energy of contradiction, that error has evoked, and is evoking, the opposite exaggeration that adheres

to all that is traditional, to all that has been regarded as belonging to the essentials of the Christian faith, and so is fearful, trembling for the Ark of God when there is no need, let us fall back upon these great words of the Master, and see that the things which constitute the living heart of His message and gift to the world are neither more nor less than these three: the supernatural Christ, the life which He imparts, and the condition on which He bestows it. "Believest thou this?" If you do, you need take very little heed of the fluctuations of contemporary opinion as to other matters, valuable and important as these may be in their place; and may let men say what they will about disputed questions on the method by which the vehicle of Revelation has been created and preserved, about the regulation of the external forms of the Church, about a hundred other things that men often lose their tempers and spoil their Christianity by fighting for, and fall back upon the great central verity, a Christ from above, the Giver of Life to all that put their trust in Him.

Let me expand this question for you. "We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God"—"believest thou this?" "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ"—"believest thou this?" "God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish"—"believest thou this?" "The Son of Man came . . . to give His life a ransom for many"—"believest thou this?" "Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"—"believest thou this?" "Now is Christ

risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept"—“believest thou this?” “I go to prepare a place for you”—“believest thou this?” “Where I am there shall also My servant be”—“believest thou this?” “So shall we ever be with the Lord”—“believest thou this?” That is Christianity; and not theories about inspiration, and priesthood, and sacramental efficacy, or any of the other thorny questions which have, in the course of ages, started up. Here is the living centre; hold fast, I beseech you, by it.

Then, again, the significance of this question is in the direction of making clear for us the way by which men lay hold of these great truths. The truths are of such a sort as that merely to say, “Oh, yes, I believe it; it is quite true!” is by no means sufficient. If a man tells me that two parallel lines produced ever so far will never meet, I say, “Yes, I believe it”; and there is nothing more to be done or said. If a man says to me, “Two and two make four,” I say, “Yes”; and there my assent ends. If a man says, “It is right to do right,” it is quite clear that the attitude of intellectual assent, which was quite enough for the other order of statements, is not enough for this one; and to merely say, “Oh, yes, it is right to do right,” is by no means the only attitude which we ought to take in regard of such a truth. And if God comes to me and says, “Thou art a sinful man, and Jesus Christ has died for thee; and if thou takest Him for thy Saviour thou shalt be saved in this life, and saved for ever,” it is just as clear that no mere acceptance of the saying as a verity exhausts my proper attitude in reference to it. Or, to come to

plainer words, no man will really, and out and out, and adequately, believe this Gospel unless he does a great deal more than assent to it or refrain from contradicting it.

So I desire to urge this form of the question on you to-night. Dear brethren, do you *trust* in "this," which you say you believe? There is no greater enemy of the Christian faith than the ordinary lazy—what the philosophers call *otiose*, which is only a grand word for lazy—assent of the understanding, because men will not take the trouble to contradict it or think about it.

That is the sort of Christianity which is the Christianity of a good many people in this chapel to-night. They do not care enough about the subject to contradict the ordinary run of belief. Of all impotent things there is nothing more impotent than a creed which lies snugly in a man's head, and never has touched his heart or his will. Why, I should get on a great deal better if I were talking to people that had never heard anything about the Gospel than I have any chance of getting on with you, who have been drenched with it all your days, till it goes over you and runs off like water off a duck's back. The shells that were hurled against the earthworks of Sebastopol broke away the front surface of the mounds, and then the rubbish protected the fortifications; and that is what happens with many of my hearers. You have heard the Gospel so often that the *débris* of your old hearings is raised between you and me, and my words cannot get at you. "Believest thou this?"—not in the fashion in which people stand up in church or chapel

and look about them and rattle off the creed every Sunday of their lives, and attach not the ghost of an idea to a single clause of it ; but in the sense that the conviction of these truths is so deep in your hearts that it moves your whole nature to cast yourselves on Jesus Christ as your Saviour and your all. That is the belief to which alone the life that is promised here will come. Oh, brethren, I have no business to ask you the question, and you have no need to answer it to me ! Sometimes good, well-meaning people do a mint of harm by pushing such questions into the faces of people unprepared. But take the question into your own hearts, and remember what belief is, and what it is that you have to believe, and answer according to its true significance, and in the light of conscience, the solemn question that I press upon you.

II.—Now, secondly, let me ask you to think of what depends upon the answer.

In the case before us—if I may look back to it for an instant—there is a very illuminative instance of what does depend upon it. Martha had to believe that Christ was the Resurrection and the Life as a condition precedent to her seeing that He was. For, as He said Himself before He spoke the mighty word which raised Lazarus, “Said I not unto thee that if thou wouldest believe thou shouldest see the glory of God ?” And so her faith was the condition of her being able to verify the facts which her faith grasped. Well, let me put that into plainer words. It is just this—a man gets from Christ what he trusts Christ to give him. And there

is no other way of proving the truth of His promises than by accepting His promises, and then they fulfil themselves. You cannot know that a medicine will cure you till you swallow it. You must first "taste" before you "see that God is good." Faith verifies itself by the experience it brings.

And what does it bring? I said, all that a man trusts Christ for. All is summed up in that one favourite word of our Lord as revealed in this fourth Gospel, which includes in itself everything of blessedness and of righteousness—life, life eternal. Dear brethren, you and I, apart from Jesus Christ, are dead in trespasses and sins. The life that we live in the flesh is an apparent life, which covers over the true death, separation from God. And you young people, fix this in your minds at the beginning, it will save you many a heartache, and many an error—there is nothing worth calling life, except that which comes to a quiet and submissive and enfranchised heart through faith in Jesus Christ. And if you will trust yourselves to Him, and answer this question with your ringing "Yea, Lord!" then you will get a life which will quicken you out of your deadness; a life which will mould you day by day into more entire beauty of character and conformity with Himself; a life which will shed sweetness and charm over dusty commonplaces, and make sudden verdure spring in dreary, herbless deserts; a life which will bring a solemn joy into sorrow, a strength for every duty, which will bring manna in the wilderness, honey from the rock, light in darkness, and a present God for your sufficient portion; a life which will

run on into the dim glories of eternity, and know no change but advancement, through the millenniums of ages.

But, dear brethren, whilst thus, on condition of their faith, the door into all Divine and endless blessedness and progress is flung wide open for men, do not forget the other side of the issues which depend on this question. For if it is true that Jesus Christ is Life, and the Source of it, and that faith in Him is the way by which you and I get it, then there is no escape from the solemn conclusion that to be out of Christ, and not to be exercising faith in Him, is to be infected with death, and to be shut up in a charnel house. I dare not suppress the plain teaching of Jesus Christ Himself: "He that hath the Son hath life; he that hath not the Son hath not life." The issues that depend upon the answer to this question of my text may be summed up, if I may venture to say so, by taking the words of our Lord Himself and converting them into their opposite—"He that believeth . . . though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on Me shall never die." He that believeth *not* in Christ, though he were living, yet shall he die, and whosoever liveth and believeth *not* shall never live. *These* are the issues—the alternative issues—that depend on your answer to this question.

III.—And now, lastly, let me ask you to think of the direct personal appeal to every soul that lies in this question.

I have dwelt upon two out of the three words of which the question is composed—"believest thou

this?" Let me dwell for a moment on the third of them—" believest thou."

Now, that suggests the thought on which I do not need to dwell, but which I seek briefly to lay upon your hearts and consciences—viz., the intensely personal act of your own faith, by which alone Jesus Christ can be of any use to you. Do not be led away by any vague notions which people have about the benefits of a Church or its ordinances. Do not suppose that any sacraments or any priest can do for you what you have to do in the awful solitude of your own determining will—put out your hand and grasp Jesus Christ. Can any person or thing be the condition or channel of spiritual blessing to you, except in so far as your own individual act of trust comes into play? You must take the bread with your own hands, you must masticate it with your own teeth, you must digest it with your own organs, before it can minister nourishment to your blood and force to your life. And there is only one way by which any man can come into any vital and life-giving connection with Jesus Christ, and that is, by the exercise of his own personal faith.

And remember, too, that as the exercise of uniting trust in Jesus Christ is exclusively your own affair, so exclusively your own affair is the responsibility of answering this question. To you alone is it addressed. You, and only you, have to answer it.

There was once a poor woman who went after Jesus Christ, and put out a pale, wasted, tremulous finger to touch the hem of His garment. His fine

sensitiveness detected the light pressure of that petitioning finger, and allowed virtue to go out, though the crowd surged about Him and thronged Him. No crowds come between you and Jesus Christ. You and He, the two of you, have, so to speak, the world to yourselves, and straight to *you* comes this question, "Believest thou?"

Ah! brethren, that habit of skulking into the middle of the multitude, and letting the most earnest appeal from the pulpit go diffused over the audience, is the reason why you sit there quiet, complacent, perhaps wholly unaffected by what I am trying to make a pointed, individual address. Suppose all the other people in this place to-night were away but you and I, would not the word that I am trying to speak come with more force to your hearts than it does now? Well, think away the world and all its millions, and realise the fact that you stand in Christ's presence, with all His regard concentrated upon you, and that to thee individually this question comes from a gracious, loving heart, which longs that you answer, "Yea, Lord, I believe!"

Why should you not? Suppose you said to Him, "No, Lord, I do not"; and suppose He said, "Why do you not?" what do you think you would say then? You will have to answer it one day, in other circumstances, when all the crowds will fall away, as they do from a soldier called out of the ranks to go up and answer for mutiny to his commanding officer. "Every one of us shall give an account of himself," and the lips that said so lovingly at the grave of Lazarus, "Believest thou this?" and are

saying it again, dear friend, to you even through my poor words, will ask it once more. For this is the question the answer to which settles whether we shall stand at His right hand or at His left. Say now, with humble faith, "Yea, Lord," and you will have the blessing of them who have not seen, and yet have believed.



XXII.

God's Banished Ones.

God doth devise means, that His banished be not expelled from
Him."—2 SAM. xiv. 14.



DAVID'S good-for-nothing son Absalom had brought about the murder of one of his brothers, and had fled the country. His father weakly loved the brilliant blackguard, and would fain have had him back, but was restrained by a sense of kingly duty. Joab, the astute commander-in-chief, a devoted friend of David, saw how the land lay, and laid a plan to give the king an excuse for doing what he wished. So he got hold of a person who is called "a wise woman" from the country, dressed her as a mourner, and sent her with an ingeniously made-up story of how she was a widow with two sons, one of whom had killed the other, and of how the relatives insisted on their right of avenging blood, and demanded the surrender of the murderer; by which, as she pathetically said, "the coal" that was left her would be "quenched." The king's sympathy was quickly roused—as was natural in so impulsive and poetic a nature—and he pledged his word, and finally his oath, that the offender should be safe.

So the woman had him in a trap, having induced him to waive justice and to absolve the guilty by an arbitrary act. Then she turns upon him with an application to his own case, and bids him free himself from the guilt of double measures and inconsistency by doing with his banished son the same thing—viz., abrogating law and bringing back the offender. In my text she urges still higher considerations—viz., those of God's way of treating criminals against His law, of whom she says that He spares their lives, and devises means—or, as the words might perhaps be rendered, “plans plannings”—by which He may bring them back. She would imply that human power and sovereignty are then noblest and likest God's when they remit penalties and restore wanderers.

I do not further follow the story, which ends, as we all know, with Absalom's ill-omened return. But the wise woman's saying goes very deep, and, in its picturesque form, may help to bring out more vividly some truths—all-important ones—to which I wish to beg your very earnest consideration and acceptance.

I.—Note, then, who are God's banished ones.

The woman's words are one of the few glimpses which we have of the condition of religious thought amongst the masses of Israel. Clearly she had laid to heart the teaching which declared the great, solemn, universal facts of sin, and consequent separation from God. For the “banished ones” of whom she speaks are no particular class of glaring criminals, but she includes within the designation the whole human race, or, at all events, the whole Israel to

which she and David belonged. There may have been in her words—though that is very doubtful—a reference to the old story of Cain after the murder of his brother. For that narrative symbolises the consequences of all evil-doing and evil-loving, in that he was cast out from the presence of God, and went away into a “land of wandering,” there to hide from the face of the Father. On the one hand, it was banishment; on the other hand, it was flight. So had Absalom’s departure been, and so is ours.

Strip away the metaphor, dear brethren, and it just comes to this, which I seek to lay upon the hearts of all my hearers this evening—you cannot be blessedly and peacefully near God, unless you are far away from sin. If you take two polished plates of metal, and lay them together, they will adhere. If you put half a dozen tiny grains of sand or dust between them, they will fall apart. So our sins have come between us and our God. They have not separated God from us, blessed be His name! for His love, and His care, and His desire to bless, His thought, and His knowledge, and His tenderness, all come to every soul of man. But they have rent us apart from Him, in so far as they make us unwilling to be near Him, incapable of receiving the truest nearness and blessedness of His presence, and sometimes desirous to hustle Him out of our thoughts, and, if we could, out of our world, rather than to expatriate in the calm sunlight of His presence.

That banishment is self-inflicted. God spurns away no man, but men spurn Him, and flee from Him. Many of us know what it is to pass whole days, and

weeks, and years, practical Atheists. God is not in all our thoughts.

And more than that, the miserable disgrace and solitude of a soul that is Godless in the world is what many of us like. The Prodigal Son scraped all his goods together, and thought himself freed from a very unwelcome bondage, and a fine independent youth, when he went away into the far country. It was not quite so pleasant when provisions and clothing fell short, and the swine's trough was the only table that was spread before him. But yet there are many of us, I fear, who are perfectly comfortable away from God, as far as we can get away from Him, and who never are aware of the degradation that lies in a soul's having lowered itself to this, that it had rather not have God inconveniently near.

Away down in the luxurious islands of the Southern Sea you will find degraded Englishmen who have chosen rather to cast in their lot with savages than to have to strain and work and grow. These poor beach-combers of the Pacific, not happy in their degradation, but wallowing in it, are no exaggerated pictures of the condition, in reality, of thousands of us who dwell far from God, and far therefore from righteousness and peace.

II.—Notice God's yearning over His banished ones.

The woman in our story hints at, or suggests, a parallel which, though inadequate, is deeply true. David was Absalom's father and Absalom's king; and the two relationships fought against each other in his heart. The king had to think of law and justice; the father cried out for his son. The young man's

offence had neither altered his relationship nor affected the father's heart.

All that is true, far more deeply, blessedly true, in regard to our relation, the wandering exile's relation, to God. For, whilst I believe that the highest form of sonship is only realised in the hearts of men who have been made partakers of a new life through Jesus Christ, I believe, just as firmly and earnestly, that every man and woman on the face of the earth, by virtue of physical life derived from God, by virtue of a spiritual being, which, in a very real and deep sense, still bears the image of God, and by reason of His continued love and care over them, are children of His. The banished son is a son yet, and is "*His* banished one." If there is love—wonderful as the thought is, and heart-melting as it ought to be—there must be loss when the child goes away. Human love would not have the same name as God's unless there were some analogy between the two. And though we walk in dark places, and had better acknowledge that the less we speak upon such profound subjects the less likely we are to err, yet it seems to me that the whole preciousness of the revelation of God in Scripture is imperilled unless we frankly recognise this—that His love is like ours, delights in being returned like ours, and is like ours in that it rejoices in presence and knows a sense of loss in absence. If you think that that is too bold a thing to say, remember who it was that taught us that the father fell on the neck of the returning prodigal, and kissed him; and that the rapture of his joy was the token and measure of the reality of his regret, and

that, it was the father to whom the prodigal son was "lost." Deep as is the mystery, let nothing, dear brethren, rob us of the plain fact that God's love moves all around the worst, the unworthiest, the most rebellious in the far-off land, and "desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his iniquity and live."

And it is you, *you*, whom He wants back ; you He would fain rescue from your aversion to good and your carelessness of Him. It is you whom He seeks, according to the great saying of the Master, "the Father seeketh" for worshippers in spirit and in truth.

III.—Note the formidable obstacles to the restoration of the banished.

The words "banished" and "expelled" in my text are in the original the same ; and the force of the whole would be better expressed if the same English word was employed as the equivalent of both. We should then see more clearly, than the variation of rendering in our text enables us to see, that the being "expelled" is no further stage which God devises means to prevent, but that what is meant is that He provides methods by which the banished should not be banished—that is, should be restored to Himself.

Now, note that the language of this "wise woman," unconsciously to herself, confesses that the parallel that she was trying to draw did not go on all fours ; for what she was asking the king to do was simply, by an arbitrary act, to sweep aside law and to remit penalty. She instinctively feels that that is not what can be done by God, and so she says that He "devises means" by which He can restore His banished.

That is to say, forgiveness and the obliteration of the consequences of a man's sin, and his restoration to the blessed nearness to God, which is life, are by no means such easy and simple things as people sometimes suppose them to be. The whole drift of popular thinking to-day goes in the direction of a very superficial and easy gospel, which merely says, "Oh, of course, of course God forgives! Is not God Love? Is not God our Father? What more do you want than that?" Ah! you want a great deal more than that, my friends. Let me press upon you two or three plain considerations. There are formidable obstacles in the way of Divine forgiveness.

If there are to be any pardon and restoration at all, they must be such as will leave untouched the sovereign majesty of God's law, and untampered with, the eternal gulf between good and evil. That easy-going gospel which says, "God will pardon, of course!" sounds very charitable and very catholic, but at bottom it is very cruel. For it shakes the very foundations on which the government of God must repose. God's law is the manifestation of God's character; and that is no flexible thing which can be bent about at the bidding of a weak, good-nature. I believe that men are right in holding that certainly God must pardon, but I believe that they are fatally wrong in not recognising this—that the only kind of forgiveness which is possible for Him to bestow is one in which there shall be no tampering with the tremendous sanctions of His awful law; and no tendency to teach that it matters little whether a man is good or bad. The pardon, which many of us seem to think

is quite sufficient, is pardon, which is nothing more noble than good-natured winking at transgression. And oh, if this be all that men have to lean on, they are leaning on a broken reed. The motto on the blue cover of the *Edinburgh Review*, for a hundred years now, is true: "The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted." David struck a fatal blow at the prestige of his own rule, when he weakly let his son off from penalty. And, if it were possible to imagine such a thing, God Himself would strike as fatal a blow at the justice and judgment which are the foundations of His throne, if His forgiveness was such as to be capable of being confounded with love which was too weakly indulgent to be righteous.

Further, if there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must be such as will turn away the heart of the pardoned man from his evil. The very story before us shows that it is not every kind of pardon which makes a man better. The scapegrace Absalom came back unsoftened, without one touch of gratitude to his father in his base heart, without the least gleam of a better nature dawning upon him, and went flaunting about the court until his viciousness culminated in his unnatural rebellion. That is to say, there is a forgiveness which nourishes the seeds of the crimes that it pardons. We have only to look into our own hearts, and we have only to look at the sort of people round us, to be very sure that, unless the forgiveness that is granted us from the heavens has in it an element which will avert our wills and desires from evil, the pardon will be very soon needed again, for the evil will very soon be done again.

If there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must come in such a fashion as that there shall be no doubt whatsoever of their reality and power. The vague kind of trust in a doubtful mercy, about which I have been speaking, may do all very well for people that have never probed the depths of their own hearts. Superficial notions of our sin, which so many of us have, are contented with superficial remedies for it. But let a man get a glimpse of his own real self, and I think that he will want something a great deal more solid to grip hold of, than nebulous talk of the kind that I have been describing. If once we feel ourselves to be struggling in the black flood of that awful river, we shall want a firmer hold upon the bank than is given to us by some rootless tree or other. We must clutch something that will stand a pull, if we are to be drawn from the many waters.

People say to us, "Oh, God will forgive, of course!" Does this world look like a place where forgiveness is such an easy thing? Is there anything more certain than that consequences are inevitable when deeds have been done, and "that whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap," and whatsoever he brews that shall he also drink? And is it into a grim, stern world of retribution like this that people will come, with their smiling, sunny gospel of a matter-of-course forgiveness, upon very easy terms of a slight penitence?

Brethren, God has to "devise means," which is a strong way of saying, in analogy to the limitations of humanity, that He cannot, by an arbitrary act of His will, pardon a sinful man. His eternal nature forbids

it. His established law forbids it. The fabric of His universe forbids it. The good of men forbids it. The problem is insoluble by human thought. The love of God is like some great river that pours its waters down its channel, and is stayed by a black dam across its course, along which it feels for any cranny through which it may pour itself. We could never save ourselves, but "He that might the vengeance best have took, found out the remedy."

IV.—And so the last word that I have to say is to note the triumphant, Divine solution of these difficulties.

The work of Jesus Christ, and the work of Jesus Christ alone, meets all the requirements. It vindicates the majesty of law, it deepens the gulf between righteousness and sin. Where is there such a demonstration of the awful truth that "the wages of sin is death" as on that Cross on which the Son of God died for us and for all His "banished" ones? Where is there such a demonstration of the fixedness of the Divine law as in that death to which the Son of God submitted Himself for us all? Where do we learn the hideousness of sin, the endless antagonism between God and it, and the fatal consequences of it, as we learn them in the sacrifice of our Lord and Saviour? Where do we find the misery and desolation of banishment from God so tragically uttered as in that cry which rent the darkness of eclipse, "My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

That work of Christ's is the only way by which it is made absolutely certain that sins forgiven shall be sins abhorred; and that a man once restored shall

cleave to his restorer as to his life. That work is the only way by which a man can be absolutely certain that there is forgiveness, in spite of all the accusations of his own conscience ; in spite of all the inexorable working out of penalties in the system of the world which seems to contradict the fond belief ; in spite of all that a foreboding gaze tells, or ought to tell, of a judgment that is to follow.

Brethren, God has devised a means. None else could have done so. I beseech you, realise these facts that I have been trying to bring before you, and the considerations that I have based upon them, so far as they commend themselves to your hearts and consciences ; and do not be content with acquiescing in them, but act upon them. We are all exiles from God, unless we have been brought nigh by the blood of Christ. In Him, and in Him alone, can God restore His banished ones. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find a pardon which cleanses the heart, and ensures the removal of the sin which it forgives. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find, not a peradventure, not a subjective certainty, but an external fact which proclaims that verily there is forgiveness for us all. I pray you, dear friends, do not be content with that half truth, which is ever the most dangerous lie, of Divine pardon apart from Jesus Christ. Lay your sins upon His head, and your hand in the hand of the elder Brother, who has come to the far-off land to seek us, and He will lead you back to the Father's house and the Father's heart, and you will be "no more strangers and wanderers, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God."

XXIII.

The Common Salvation.

"THE common salvation."—JUDE 8.

"THE common faith."—TITUS i. 4.



JUDE was probably one of Christ's brothers, and a man of position and influence in the Church. He is writing to the whole early Christian community, numbering men widely separated from each other by nationality, race, culture, and general outlook on life; and he beautifully and humbly unites himself with them all as recipients of a "common salvation." Paul is writing to Titus, the veteran leader to a raw recruit. Wide differences of mental power, of maturity of religious experience, separated the two; and yet Paul beautifully and humbly associates himself with his pupil, as exercising a "common faith."

Probably neither of the writers meant more than to bring himself nearer to the persons whom they were respectively addressing; but their language goes a great deal further than the immediate application of it. The "salvation" was "common" to Jude and his readers, as "the faith" was to Paul and Titus, because the salvation and the faith are one, all the world over. It is for the sake of insisting upon this community,

which is universal, that I have ventured to isolate these two fragments from their proper connection, and to bring them together. But you will notice that they take up the same thought at two different stages, as it were. The one declares that there is but one remedy and healing for all the world's woes ; the other declares that there is but one way by which that remedy can be applied. All who possess "the common salvation" are so blessed because they exercise "the common faith."

I.—Note the underlying conception of a universal deepest need.

That Christian word "salvation" has come to be threadbare and commonplace, and slips over people's minds without leaving any dint. We all think we understand it. Some of us have only the faintest and vaguest conception of what it means, and have never realised the solemn view of human nature and its necessities which lies beneath it. And I want to press that upon you now. The word "to save" means either of two things—to heal from a sickness, or to deliver from a danger. These two ideas of sickness to be healed and of dangers to be secured from enter into the Christian use of the word. Underlying it is the implication that the condition of humanity is universally that of needing healing of a sore sickness, and of needing deliverance from an overhanging and tremendous danger. *Sin* is the sickness, and the issues of sin are the danger. And sin is making myself my centre and my law, and so distorting and flinging out of gear, as it were, my relations to God.

Surely it does not want many words to show that that must be the most important thing about a man. Deep down below all superficialities there lies this fundamental fact, that he has gone wrong with regard to God; and no amount of sophistication about heredity and environment and the like can ever wipe out the blackness of the fact that men willingly do break through the law, which commands us all to yield ourselves to God, and not to set ourselves up as our own masters and our own aims and ends, independently of Him. I say that is the deepest wound of humanity.

In these days of social unrest there are plenty of voices round us that proclaim other needs as being clamant, but, oh, they are all shallow and surface as compared with the deepest need of all; and the men that come round the sick bed of humanity and say, "Ah, the patient is suffering from a lack of education," or "the patient is suffering from unfavourable environment," have diagnosed the disease superficially. There is something deeper the matter than that, and unless the physician has probed further into the wound than these surface appearances, I am afraid his remedy will go as short a way down as his conception of the evil goes.

Oh, brethren, there is something else the matter with us than ignorance or unfavourable conditions. "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint." The tap-root of all human miseries lies in the solemn fact of human transgression. That is a universal fact. Wide differences part us, but there is one thing that we have all in common: a

conscience and a will that lifts itself against disliked good. Beneath all surface differences of garb there lies the same fact, the common sickness of sin. The king's robe, the pauper's uniform, the student's gown, the mill-hand's fustian, the naked savage's brown skin, each cover a heart that is evil, and because it is evil, needs salvation from sickness and deliverance from danger.

For do not forget that if it is true that men have driven their rebellious chariots through God's law, they cannot do that without bringing down God's hand upon them, and they ought not to be able to do it; and He would not be a loving God if it were not so. There are dangers; dangers from the necessary inevitable consequences, here and yonder, of rebellion against Him.

Now, do not let us lose ourselves in generalities. That is the way in which many of us have all our lives long blunted the point of the message of the Gospel to our hearts. That is what we do with all sorts of important moral truths. For instance, I suppose there never was a time in your lives when you did not believe that all men must die. But I suppose most of us can remember some time when there came upon us, with a shock which made some of us cower before it as an unwelcome thing, the thought, "*And I must.*"

The *common* sickness? Yes! "Thou art the man." Oh, brother, whatever you may have or whatever you may want, be sure of this: that your deepest needs will not be met, your sorest sickness will not be healed, your most tremendous peril not secured

against, until the fact of your individual sinfulness and the consequences of that fact are somehow or other dealt with, staunched, and swept away. So much, then, for the first point.

II.—Now a word as to the common remedy. One of our texts gives us that—"the common salvation."

You all know what I am going to say, and so, perhaps, you suppose that it is not worth while for me to say it. I dare say some of you think that it was not worth while coming here to-night to hear the whole, threadbare, common-place story. Well! is it worth while for me to speak once more to men that have so often heard and so often neglected? Let me try. Oh, that I could get you one by one, and drive home to each single soul that is listening to me, or perhaps, that is *not* listening, the message that I have to bring!

"The common salvation." There is one remedy for the sickness. There is one safety against the danger. There is *only* one, because it is the remedy for all men, and it is the remedy for all men because it is the remedy for each. Jesus Christ deals, as no one else has ever pretended to deal, with this outstanding fact of my transgression and yours.

He, by His death, as I believe, has saved the world from the danger, because He has set right the world's relations to God. I am not going, at this stage of my sermon, or to my present audience, to enter upon anything in the nature of discussion. My purpose is an entirely different one. I want to press upon you, dear brethren, this plain fact, that since there is a God, and since you and I have sinned, and since things are as

they are, and the consequences will be as they will be, both in this world and in the next, we all stand in danger of death—death eternal, which comes from, and, in one sense, consists of, separation in heart and mind from God.

You believe in a judgment day, do you not? Whether you do or not, you have only to open your eyes, you have only to turn them inwards, to see that even here and now, every sin and transgression and disobedience *does* receive its just recompense of reward. You cannot do a wrong thing without hurting yourself, without desolating some part of your nature, without enfeebling your power of resistance to evil and aspiration after good, without lowering yourself in the scale of being, and making yourself ashamed to stand before the bar of your own conscience. You cannot do some wrong things, that some of you are fond of doing, without dragging after them consequences, in this world, of anything but an agreeable kind. Sins of the flesh avenge themselves in kind, as some of you young men know, and will know better in the days that are before you. Transgressions which are plain and clear in the eyes of even the world's judgment draw after them damaged reputations, enfeebled health, closed doors of opportunity, and a whole host of such things. And all these are but a kind of premonitions and overshadowings of that solemn judgment that lies beyond. For all men will have to eat the fruit of their doings and drink that which they have prepared. But on the Cross, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, bore the weight of the world's sin, yours and mine and every man's. There is one

security against the danger ; and it is that He, fronting the incidence of the Divine law, says, as He said to His would-be captors in the garden, " If ye seek Me, let *these* go their way." And they go their way by the power of His atoning death.

Further, Jesus Christ imparts a life that cures the sickness of sin.

What is the meaning of this Whitsuntide that all the Christian world is professing to keep to-day ? Is it to commemorate a thing that happened nineteen centuries ago, when a handful of Jews for a few minutes had the power of talking in other languages, and a miraculous light flamed over their heads and then disappeared ? Was that all ? Have you and I any share in it ? Yes. For if Pentecost means anything it means this, that, all down through the ages, Jesus Christ is imparting to men that cleave to Him the real gift of a new life, free from all the sickness of the old, and healthy with the wholesomeness of His own perfect sinlessness, so that, however inveterate and engrained a man's habits of wrong-doing may have been, if he will turn to that Saviour, and let Him work upon him, he will be delivered from his evil. The leprosy of his flesh, though the lumps of diseased matter may be dropping from the bones, and the stench of corruption may drive away human love and sympathy, can be cleansed, and his flesh become like the flesh of a little child, if only he will trust in Jesus Christ. The sickness can be cured. Christ deals with men in the depths of their being. He will give you, if you will, a new life and new tastes, directions, inclinations, impulses, perceptions, hopes, and capa-

cities, and the evil will pass away, and you will be whole.

Ah, brethren, that is the only cure. I was talking a minute or two ago about imperfect diagnoses; and there are superficial remedies too. Men round us are trying, in various ways to staunch the world's wounds, to heal the world's sicknesses. God forbid that I should say a word to discourage any such! I would rather wish them ten times more numerous than they are; but at the same time I believe that, unless you deal with the fountain at its head, you will never cleanse the stream, and that you must have the radical change, which comes by the gift of a new life in Christ, before men can be delivered from the sickness of their sins. And so all these panaceas, whilst they may do certain surface good, are, if I may quote a well-known phrase, like "pills against an earthquake," or like giving a lotion to cure pimples, when the whole head is sick and the whole heart faint. You will never cure the ills of humanity until you have delivered men from the dominion of their sin.

Jesus Christ heals society by healing the individual. There is no other way of doing it. If the units are corrupt the community cannot be pure. And the only way to make the units pure is that they shall have Christ on the Cross for their redemption, and Christ in the heart for their cleansing. And then all the things that men try to produce in the shape of social good and the like, apart from Him, will come as a consequence of the new state of things that arises when the individuals are renewed. Apart from Him all human attempts to deal with social evils are

inadequate. There is a terrible disillusionising and disappointment awaiting many eager enthusiasts to-day, who think that by certain external arrangements, or by certain educational and cultivated processes, they can mend the world's miseries. You educate a nation. Well and good, and one result of it is that your bookshops get choked with trash, and that vice has a new avenue of approach to men's hearts. You improve the economic condition of the people. Well and good, and one result of it is that a bigger percentage than ever of their funds finds its way into the drink-shop. You give a nation political power. Well and good, and one result of it is that the least worthy and the least wise have to be flattered and coaxed, because they are the rulers. Every good thing, divorced from Christ, becomes an ally of evil, and the only way by which the dreams and desires of men can be fulfilled is by the salvation which is in Him entering the individual hearts and thus moulding society.

III.—Now, lastly, the common means of possessing the common healing.

My second text tells us what that is—"the common faith." That is another of the words which is so familiar that it is unintelligible, which has been dinned into your ears ever since you were little children, and in the case of many of you excites no definite idea, and is supposed to be an obscure kind of thing that belongs to theologians and preachers, but has little to do with your daily lives. There is only one way by which this healing and safety that I have been speaking about can possibly find its way into a

man's heart. You have all been trained from childhood to believe that men are saved by faith, and a great many of you, I dare say, think that men might have been saved by some other way, if God had chosen to appoint it so. But that is a clear mistake. If it is true that salvation is a gift from God, then it is quite plain that the only thing that we require is an outstretched hand. If it is true that Jesus Christ's death on the Cross has brought salvation to all the world, then it is quite plain that, His work being finished, we have no need to come in pottering with any works of ours, and that the only thing we have to do is to accept it. If it is true that Jesus Christ will enter men's hearts, and there give a new spirit and a new life, which will save them from their sins and make them free from the law of sin and death, then it is plain that the one thing that we have to do is to open our hearts and say, "Come in, Thou King of Glory, come in!" Because salvation is a gift; because it is the result of a finished work; because it is imparted to men by the impartation of Christ's own life to them: for all these reasons it is plain that the only way by which God can save a man is by that man's putting his trust in Jesus Christ. It is no arbitrary appointment. The only possible way of possessing "the common salvation" is by the exercise of "the common faith."

So we are all put upon one level, no matter how different we may be in attainments, in mental capacity—geniuses and blockheads, scholars and ignoramuses, millionaires and paupers, students and savages, we are all on the one level. There is no carriage road into

heaven. We have all to go in at the strait gate, and there is no special entry for people that come with their own horses; and so some people do not like to have to descend to that level, and to go with the ruck and the undistinguished crowd, and to be saved just in the same fashion as Tom, Dick, and Harry, and they turn away.

There was a book published not long ago—I have not read it—with a very conceited title, “The Religion of a Literary Man.” I should have thought that the religion of a literary man was just the same as the religion of a lurryman; and that if cultivated people insist upon having a private door of their own into Heaven, it is extremely likely that they will find themselves shut out. “There is no difference . . . all have sinned and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace.”

Plenty of people believe in a “common salvation,” meaning thereby a vague, indiscriminate gift that is flung broadcast over the mass. Plenty of people believe in a “common faith.” We hear, for instance, about a “national Christianity,” and a “national recognition of religion,” and “Christian nations,” and the like. There are no Christian nations except nations of which the individuals are Christians, and there is no “common faith” except the faith exercised in common by all the units that make up a community.

So do not suppose that anything short of your own personal act brings you into possession of “the common salvation.” The table is spread, but you must take the bread into your own hands, and you must

masticate it with your own teeth, and you must assimilate it in your own body, or it is no bread for you. The salvation is a "common," like one of the great prairies, but each separate settler has to peg off his own claim, and fence it in, and take possession of it, or he has no share in the broad land. So remember that "the common salvation" must be made the individual salvation by the individual exercise of "the common faith." Cry, "Lord! *I* believe!" and then you will have the right to say, "The Lord is *my* strength; He also is become *my* salvation."



XXIV.

The Persistence of Thwarted Love.

"IF so be that he find it."—MATT. xviii. 13.

"UNTIL he find it."—LUKE xv. 4.



LIKE other teachers, Jesus seems to have had favourite points of view and utterances which came naturally to His lips. There are several instances in the Gospels of His repeating the same sayings in entirely different connections and with different applications. One of these habitual points of view seems to have been the thought of men as wandering sheep, and of Himself as the Shepherd. The metaphor has become so familiar that we need a moment's reflection to grasp the mingled tenderness, sadness, and majesty of it. He thought habitually of all humanity as a flock of lost sheep, and of Himself as high above them, unparticipant of their evil, and having one errand—to bring them back.

And not only does He frequently refer to this symbol, but we have the two editions, from which my texts are respectively taken, of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. I say two editions, because it seems to me a great deal more probable that Jesus should have

repeated Himself than that either of the Evangelists should have ventured to take this gem and set it in an alien setting. The two versions differ slightly in some unimportant expressions, and Matthew's is the more condensed of the two. But the most important variation is the one which is brought to light by the two fragments which I have ventured to isolate as texts. "*If He find*" implies the possible failure of the Shepherd's search; "*till He find*" implies His unwearied persistence in the teeth of all failure. And, taken in conjunction, they suggest some very blessed and solemn considerations, which I pray for strength to lay upon your minds and hearts this evening.

I.—But first let me say a word or two about the more general thought brought out in both these clauses—of the Shepherd's search.

Now, beautiful and heart-touching as that picture is, of the Shepherd away amongst the barren mountains searching minutely in every ravine and thicket, it wants a little explanation in order to be brought into correspondence with the fact which it expresses. For His search for His lost property is not in ignorance of where it is, and His finding of it is not His discovery of His sheep, but its discovery of its Shepherd. We have to remember wherein consists the loss, before we can understand wherein consists the search.

Now, if we ask ourselves that question first, we get a flood of light on the whole matter. The great hundredth Psalm, according to its true rendering, says, "It is He that hath made us, and we are *His*; . . . we are . . . the sheep of His pasture."

But God's true possession of man is not simply the possession inherent in the act of creation. For there is only one way in which spirit can own spirit, or heart can possess heart, and that is through the voluntary yielding and love of the one to the other. So Jesus Christ, who, in all His seeking after us men, is the voice and hand of Almighty Love, does not count that He has found a man until the man has learned to love Him. For He loses us when we are alienated from Him, when we cease to trust Him, when we refuse to obey Him, when we will not yield to Him, but put Him far away from us. Therefore the search which, as being Christ's is God's in Christ, is for love, for trust, for obedience; and in reality it consists of all the energies by which Jesus Christ, as God's embodiment and representative, seeks to woo and win you and me back to Himself, that He may truly possess us.

If the Shepherd's seeking is but a tender metaphor for the whole aggregate of the ways by which the love that is Divine and human in Jesus Christ moves round about our closed hearts, as the water may round some hermetically sealed vessel, seeking for an entrance, then surely the first and chiefest of them, which has its appeal to each of us as directly as to any man that ever lived, is that great mystery that Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God, left the ninety and nine that were safe on the high pastures of the mountains of God, and came down among us, out into the wilderness, "to seek and to save that which was lost."

And, brother, that method of winning—I was going

to say, of *earning*—our love comes straight in its appeal to every single soul on the face of the earth. Do not say that thou wert not in Christ's heart and mind when He willed to be born and willed to die. Thou, and thou, and thou, and every single unit of humanity was there clear before Him in its individuality ; and He died for thee, and for me, and for *every* man. And, in one aspect, that is more than to say that He died for *all* men. There was a specific intention in regard to each of us in the mission of Jesus Christ ; and when He went to the Cross the Shepherd was not giving His life for a confused flock of which He knew not the units, but for sheep the face of each of whom He knows, and each of whom He loves. There is His first seeking ; there is His chief seeking. There is the seeking which ought to appeal to every soul of man, and which, ever since you were children, has been making its appeal to you. Has it done so in vain ? Dear friend, let not the heart still be hard.

He seeks us by every record of that mighty love that died for us, even when it is being spoken as poorly, and with as many limitations and imperfections, as I am speaking it now. "As though God did beseech you by us, we pray in Christ's stead." It is not arrogance, God forbid ! it is simply true when I say, Never mind about me ; but my word to-night, in so far as it is true and tender, is Christ's word to you. And here, in our midst, that unseen Form is passing along these pews and speaking to these hearts, and the Shepherd is seeking His sheep.

He seeks each of us by the inner voices and emotions in our hearts and minds, by those strange

whisperings which sometimes we hear, by the suddenly upstarting convictions of duty and truth which sometimes, without manifest occasion, flash across our hearts. These voices are Christ's voice, for, in a far deeper sense than most men superficially believe, "He is the true Light that lighteth every man coming into the world."

He is seeking us by our unrest, by our yearnings after we know not what, by our dim dissatisfaction which insists upon making itself felt in the midst of joys and delights, and which the world fails to satisfy as much as it fails to interpret. There is a cry in every heart, little as the bearer of the heart translates it into its true meaning—a cry after God, even the living God. And by all your unrests, your disappointments, your hopes unfulfilled, your hopes fulfilled and blasted in the fulfilment, your desires that perish unfruited; by all the mystic movements of the spirit that yearns for something beyond the material and the visible, Jesus Christ is seeking His sheep.

He seeks us by the discipline of life, for I believe that Christ is the active Providence of God, and that the hands that were pierced on the Cross do move the wheels of the history of the world, and mould the destinies of individual spirits.

The deepest meaning of all life is that we should be won to seek Him who in it all is seeking us, and led to venture our hopes, and fling the anchor of our faith beyond the bounds of the visible, that it may fasten in the Eternal, even in Christ Himself, "the same yesterday and to-day and for ever," when earth and its training are done with. Brethren, it is a blessed thing

to live, when we interpret life's smallnesses aright as the voice of the Master, who, by them all—our sadness and our gladness, the unrest of our hearts and the yearnings and longings of our spirits, by the ministry of His Word, by the record of His sufferings—is echoing the invitation of the Cross itself, "Come unto Me, all ye . . . and I will give you rest!" So much for the Shepherd's search.

II.—And now, in the second place, a word about the search that is thwarted.

"If so be that He find." That is an awful *if*, when we think of what lies below it. The thing seems an absurdity when it is uttered, and yet it is a grim fact in many a life—viz., that Christ's effort can fail and be thwarted. Not that his search is perfunctory or careless, but that we shroud ourselves in darkness through which that love can find no way. It is we, not He, that are at fault when He fails to find that which He seeks. There is nothing more certain than that God and Christ, the image of God, desire the rescue of every man, woman, and child of the human race. Let no teaching blur that sunlight fact. There is nothing more certain than that Jesus Christ has done, and is doing, all that He can do to secure that purpose. If He could make every man love Him, and so find every man, be sure that he would do it. But He cannot. For here is the central mystery of creation, which if we could solve there would be few knots that would resist our fingers, that a finite will like yours or mine can lift itself up against God, and that, having the capacity, it has the desire. He says, "Come!" We say, "I will not." That door of the heart opens

from within ; and He never kicks it open. He stands at the door and knocks. And then the same solemn *if* comes—"If any man open, I will come in." "If any man keeps it shut, and holds on to it to prevent its being opened, I will stop out."

Brethren, I seek to press upon you this evening the one plain truth, that if you are not saved men and women, there is no person in heaven or earth or hell that has any blame in the matter but yourself alone. God appeals to us, and says, "What more *could* have been done to My vineyard that I have not done unto it ?" His hands are clean, and the infinite love of Christ is free from all blame, and it all lies at our own doors.

I must not dwell upon the various reasons which lead so many men among us—as, alas ! the utmost charity cannot but see that there are—to turn away from Christ's appeals, and to be unwilling to "have this Man" either "to reign over them" or to save them. There are many such, I am sure, in my audience to-night ; and I would like, if I could, to draw them to that Lord in whom alone they have life, and rest, and holiness, and heaven.

One great reason is because you do not believe that you need Him. There is an awful inadequacy in most men's conceptions—and still more in their feeling—about their sin. Oh, dear friends, if you would only submit your consciences for one meditative half-hour to the light of God's highest law, I think you would find out something more than many of you know, as to what you are and what your sin is. Many of us do not much believe that we are in any danger.

I have seen a sheep comfortably cropping the short grass on a down over the sea, with one foot out in the air, and a precipice of 500 feet below it, and at the bottom the crawling water. It did not know that there was any danger of going over. That is like some of us. If you believed what is true—that “sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death,” and understood what “death” meant, you would feel the mercy of the Shepherd seeking you.

Some of us think we are in the flock when we are not. Some of us do not like submission. Some of us have no inclination for the sweet pastures that He provides, and would rather stay where we are, and have the fare that is going there.

We do not need to *do* anything to put Him away. I have no doubt that some of us this evening, as soon as my voice ceases, will plunge again into worldly talk and thoughts before they are down the chapel steps, and so blot out, as well as they can, any vagrant and superficial impression that may have been made. Dear brethren, it is a very easy matter to turn away from the Shepherd’s voice. “I called, and ye refused. I stretched out My hands, and *no man regarded.*” That is all ! That is what you do, and that is enough.

III.—So, lastly, the thwarted search prolonged.

“Till He find !” That is a wonderful and a merciful word. It indicates the infinitude of Christ’s patient forgiveness and perseverance. We tire of searching. “Can a mother forget” or abandon her seeking after a lost child ? Yes ! if it has gone on for so long as to show that further search is hopeless, she will go home and nurse her sorrow in her heart. Or, perhaps, like

some poor mothers and wives, it will turn her brain, and one sign of her madness will be that, long years after grief should have been calm because hope was dead, she will still be looking for the little one so long lost. But Jesus Christ stands at the closed door, as a great modern picture shows, though it has been so long undisturbedly closed that the hinges are brown with rust, and weeds grow high against it. He stands there in the night, with the dew in His hair, unheeded or repelled, like some stranger in a hostile village seeking for a night's shelter. He will not be put away; but, after all refusals, still, with gracious finger, knocks upon the door, and speaks into the heart. Some of you have refused Him all your lives, and perhaps you have grey hairs upon you to-night. And He is speaking to you still. He "suffereth long, is not easily provoked, is not soon angry; hopeth all things," even of the obstinate rejectors.

For that is another thing that this word "till" preaches to us—viz., the possibility of bringing back those that have gone furthest away and have been longest away. The world has a great deal to say about incurable cases of moral obliquity and deformity. Christ knows nothing about "incurable cases." If there is a worst man in the world—and perhaps there is—there is nothing but his own disinclination to prevent his being brought back, and made as pure as an angel.

But do not let us deal with generalities, let us bring the truths to ourselves. Dear brethren, I know nothing about the most of you. I should not know you again if I met you in five minutes. I have never spoken to

many of you, and probably never shall, except in this public way; but I know that *you* need Christ, and that Christ wants *you*. And I know that, however far you have gone, you have not gone so far but that His love feels out through the remoteness to grasp you, and would fain draw you to itself.

I daresay you have seen upon some dreary moor, or at the foot of some "scaur" on the hillside, the bleached bones of a sheep, lying white and grim among the purple heather. It strayed, unthinking of danger, tempted by the sweet herbage; it fell; it vainly bleated; it died. But what if it had heard the shepherd's call, and had preferred to lie where it fell, and to die where it lay? We talk about "silly sheep." Are there any of them so foolish as men and women sitting in these pews to-night, who will not answer the Shepherd's voice when they hear it, with, "Lord, here am I, come and help me out of this miry clay, and bring me back." He is saying to each of you, "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?" May He never have to say about any of us, "Ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life!"



XXV.

A New Year's Message.

"But go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days."—DAN. xii. 13.



DANIEL had been receiving partial insight into the future, by the visions recorded in previous chapters. He sought for clearer knowledge, and was told that the book of the future was sealed and closed, so that no further enlightenment was possible for him. But duty was clear, whatever might be dark; and there were some things in the future certain, whatever might be problematic. So he is bidden back to the common paths of life, and is enjoined to pursue his patient course with an eye on the end to which it conducts, and to leave the unknown future to unfold itself as it may.

I do not need, I suppose, to point the application. Anticipations of what may be before us have, no doubt, been more or less in the minds of all of us in the last few days. The cast of them will have been very different, according to age and present circumstances. But bright or dark, hopes or dreads, they reveal nothing. Sometimes we think we see a little way ahead, and then swirling mists hide all.

So I think that the words of my text may help us this morning, not only to apprehend the true task of the moment, but to discriminate between the things in the unknown future that are hidden and those that stand clear. There are three points, then, in this message—the journey ; the pilgrim's resting place ; and the final home. “ Go thou thy way till the end be : for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days.” Let us, then, look at these three points briefly.

I.—The journey.

That is a threadbare metaphor for life. But threadbare as it is, its significance is inexhaustible. But before I deal with it, note that very significant “ but ” with which my text begins. The prophet has been asking for a little more light to shine on the dark unknown that stretches before him. And his request is negatived—“ *But go thou thy way.*” In the connection that means, “ Do not waste your time in dreaming about, or peering into, what you can never see, but fill the present with strenuous service.” “ *Go thou thy way.*” Never mind the far-off issues ; the step before you is clear, and that is all that concerns you. Plod along the path, and leave to-morrow to take care of itself. There is a piece of plain practical wisdom, none the less necessary for us to lay to heart because it is so obvious and commonplace.

And then, if we turn to the emblem with which the continuity of daily life and daily work is set forth here, as the path along which we travel, how much wells up in the shape of suggestion, familiar, it may be, but very needful and wholesome for us all to lay to heart !

The figure implies perpetual change. The landscape glides past us, and we travel on through it. How impossible it would be for us older people to go back to the feelings, to the beliefs, to the tone and the temper with which we used to look at life thirty or forty years ago! Strangely and solemnly, like the silent motion of some gliding scene in a theatre, bit by bit, inch by inch, change comes over all our surroundings, and, saddest of all, in some aspects, over ourselves.

“We all are changed, by still degrees,
All but the basis of the soul.”

And it is foolish for us ever to forget that we live in a state of things in which constant alteration is the law, as surely as, when the train whizzes through the country, the same landscape never meets the eye twice, as the traveller looks through the windows. Let us, then, accept the fact that nothing abides with us, and so not be bewildered nor swept away from our moorings, nor led to vain regrets and paralysing retrospects when the changes that must come do come, sometimes slowly and imperceptibly, sometimes with stunning suddenness, like a bolt out of the blue. If life is truly represented under the figure of a journey, nothing is more certain than that we sleep in a fresh hospice every night, and leave behind us every day scenes that we shall never traverse again. What madness, then, to be putting out eager and desperate hands to clutch what must be left, and so to contradict the very law under which we live!

Then another of the well-worn commonplaces which are so believed by us all that we never think about them, and therefore need to be urged, as I am trying,

poorly enough, to do now—another of the common-places that spring from this image is that life is continuous. Geologists used to be divided into two schools, one of whom explained everything by invoking great convulsions, the other by appealing to the uniform action of laws. There are no convulsions in life. To-morrow is the child of to-day, and yesterday was the father of this day. What we are springs from what we have been, and settles what we shall be. The road leads some-whither, and we follow it step by step. As the old nursery rhyme has it—

“One foot up and one foot down,
That’s the way to London Town.”

We make our characters by the continuity of our small actions. Let no man think of his life as if it were a heap of unconnected points. It is a chain of links that are forged together inseparably. Let no man say, “I do this thing, and there shall be no evil consequences impressed upon my life in consequence of it.” It cannot be. “To-morrow *shall be* as this day, and much more abundant.” We shall to-morrow be more of everything that we are to-day, unless by some strong effort of repentance and change we break the fatal continuity, and make a new beginning by God’s grace. But let us lay to heart this, as a very solemn truth which lifts up into mystical and unspeakable importance the things that men idly call trifles, that life is one continuous whole, a march towards a definite end.

And therefore we ought to see to it that the direction in which our life runs is one that conscience and God can approve. And, since the rapidity with which

a body falls increases as it falls, the more needful that we give the right direction and impulses to the life. It will be a dreadful thing if our downward course acquires strength as it travels, and, being slow at first, gains in celerity, and accrues to itself mass and weight; like an avalanche started from an Alpine summit, which is but one or two bits of snow and ice at first, and falls at last into the ravine, tons of white destruction. The lives of many of us are like it.

Further, the metaphor suggests that no life runs its fitting course unless there is continuous effort. There will be crises when we have to run with panting breath and strained muscles. There will be long stretches of level commonplace where speed is not needed, but "pegging away" is, and the one duty is persistent continuousness in a course. But whether the task of the moment is to "run and not be weary," or to "walk and not faint," crises and commonplace stretches of land alike require continuous effort, in order to "run with patience the race that is set before us."

Mark the emphasis of my text, "Go thy way till the end." You, my contemporaries, you older men! do not fancy that in the deepest aspect any life has ever a period in it in which a man may "take it easy." You may do that in regard of outward things, and it is the hope and the reward of faithfulness in youth and middle age that, when the grey hairs come to be upon us, we may slack off a little in regard of outward activity. But in regard of all the deepest things of life, no man may ever lessen his diligence until he has attained the goal.

Some of you will remember how, in a stormy October night years ago, the *Royal Charter* went down when three hours from Liverpool, and the passengers had met in the saloon and voted a testimonial to the captain because he had brought them across the ocean in safety. Until the anchor is down and we are inside the harbour we may be shipwrecked, if we are careless in our navigation. "Go thou thy way *until the end*." And remember, you older people! that until that end is reached you have to use all your power, and to labour as earnestly, and guard yourself as carefully, as at any period before.

And not only "*till the end*," but "*go thou thy way to the end*." That is to say, let the thought that the road has a termination be ever present with us all. Now, there is a great deal of the so-called devout contemplation of death which is anything but wholesome. People were never meant to be always looking forward to that close. Men may think of "*the end*" in a hundred different connections. One man may say, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." Another man may say, "I have only a little while to master this science, to make a name for myself, to win wealth. Let me bend all my efforts in a fierce determination—made the fiercer because of the thought of the brevity of life—to win the end." The mere contemplation of the shortness of our days may be an ally of immorality, of selfishness, of meanness, of earthly ambitions, as well as lay a cooling hand on fevered brows, and bring down the pulsations of hearts that throb for earth.

But whilst it is not wholesome to be always think-

ing of death, it is more unwholesome still never to let the contemplation of that end come into our calculations of the future, and to shape our lives in an obstinate blindness to what is the one certain fact which rises up through the whirling mists of the unknown future, like some black cliff from the clouds that wreath around it. Is it not strange that the surest thing is the thing that we forget most of all ? It sometimes seems to me as if the sky rained down opiates upon people, as if all mankind were in a conspiracy of lunacy, because they, with one accord, ignore the most prominent and forget the only certain fact about their future ; and in all their calculations do not "so number their days" as to "apply" their "hearts unto wisdom." "Go thou thy way until the end." And let thy way be marked out with a constant eye towards the end.

II.—Note, again, the resting-place.

"Go thou thy way, for thou shalt rest." Now, I suppose, to most careful readers that clearly is intended as a gracious, and what they call a euphemistic, way of speaking about death. "Thou shalt rest." Well, that is a thought that takes away a great deal of the grimness and the terror with which men generally invest the close. It is a thought, of course, the force of which is very different in different stages and conditions of life. To you young people, eager, perhaps ambitious, full of the consciousness of inward power, happy, and, in all human probability, with the greater portion of your lives before you in which to do what you desire, the thought of "rest" comes with a very faint appeal. And yet I do not suppose that

there is anybody who has not some burden that it is hard to carry; or who has not learned what weariness means.

But to us older people, who have tasted disappointments, who have known the pressure of grinding toil for a great many years, whose hearts have been gnawed by harassments and anxieties of different kinds, whose lives are apparently drawing nearer their end than the present moment is to their beginning, the thought, "Thou shalt rest," comes with a very different appeal from that which it makes to these others.

"There remaineth a rest for the people of God,
And I have had trouble enough for one,"

says our great modern poet; and therein he echoes the deepest thoughts of most of this congregation. That rest is the cessation of toil, but the continuance of activity—the cessation of toil, and anxiety, and harassment, and care. And so the darkness is made beautiful when we think that God draws the curtain, as a careful mother does in her child's chamber, that the light may not disturb the slumberer.

But, dear friends, that final cessation of earthly work has a double character. "Thou shalt rest" was said to this man of God. But what of people whom death takes away from the only sort of work that they are fit to do? It will be no rest to long for the occupations which you never can have any more. And if you have been living for this wretched present, to be condemned to have nothing to do any more in it and with it will be torture, and not repose. Ask yourselves how you would like to be taken out of your shop, or

your mill, or your study, or your laboratory, or your counting-house, and never to be allowed to go into it again. Some of you know how wearisome a holiday is when you cannot get to your daily work. You will get a very long holiday after you are dead. And if the hungering after the withdrawn occupation persists, there will be very little pleasure in rest. There is only one way by which we can make that inevitable end a blessing, and turn death into the opening of the gate of our resting-place ; and that is by setting our heart's desires and our spirit's trust on Jesus Christ, who is the "Lord both of the dead and of the living." If we do that, even that last enemy will come to us as Christ's representative, with Christ's own word upon his lip, "Come unto Me, ye that are weary and are heavy laden, and I—because He has given me the power—I will give you rest."

"Sleep, full of rest, from head to foot ;
Lie still, dry dust, secure of change."

III.—That leads me to the last thought, the Home. "Thou shalt stand in thy lot at the end of the days." "Stand"—that is Daniel's way of preaching, what he has been preaching in several other parts of his book, the doctrine of the resurrection. "Thou shalt stand in thy lot." That is a reference to the ancient partition of the land of Canaan amongst the tribes, where each man got his own portion, and sat under his own vine and fig tree. And so there emerge from these symbolical words thoughts which, at this stage of my sermon, I can barely touch upon. First comes the thought that, however sweet and blessed that reposeful state may be, humanity has not attained

its perfection until once again the perfected spirit is mated with, and enclosed within, its congenial servant, a perfect body. "Corporeity is the end of man." Body, soul, and spirit partake of the redemption of God.

But then, apart from that, on which I must not dwell, my text suggests one or two thoughts. God is the true inheritance. Each man has his own portion of the common possession. Or, to put it into plainer words, in that perfect land each individual has precisely so much of God as he is capable of possessing. "Thou shalt stand in thy lot." And what determines the lot is how we wend our way till that other end, the end of life. "The end of the days" is a period far beyond the end of the life of Daniel. And as the course that terminated in repose has been, so the possession of "the portion of the inheritance of the saints in light" shall be, for which that course has made men meet. Destiny is character worked out. A man will be where he is fit for, and have what he is fit for. Time is the lackey of eternity. His life here settles how much of God a man shall be able to hold, when he stands in his lot at the "end of the days." And his allotted portion, as it stretches around him, will be but the issue and the outcome of his life here on earth.

Therefore, dear brethren, tremendous importance attaches to each fugitive moment. Therefore each act that we do is weighted with eternal consequences. If we will put our trust in Him, "in whom also we obtain the inheritance," and will travel on life's common way in cheerful godliness, we may front all

the uncertainties of the unknown future, sure of two things—that we shall rest, and that we shall stand in our lot. We shall all go where we have fitted ourselves, by God's grace, to go ; get what we have fitted ourselves to possess ; and be what we have made ourselves. To the Christian man the word comes, "Thou shalt stand in thy lot." And the other word, that was spoken about one sinner, will be fulfilled in all whose lives have been unfitting them for heaven : "Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place." He, too, stands in his lot. Now settle which lot is yours.



XXVI.

The Names on Aaron's Breastplate.

"AARON shall bear their names before the Lord upon his two shoulders for a memorial. . . . And Aaron shall bear the names of the Children of Israel in the breastplate upon his heart when he goeth in unto the Holy Place."—EXODUS xxviii. 12, 29.



EVERY part of the elaborately prescribed dress of the high priest was significant. But the significance of the whole was concentrated in the inscription upon his mitre, "Holiness to the Lord," and in those others upon his breastplate and his shoulder.

The breastplate was composed of folded cloth, in which were lodged twelve precious stones, in four rows of three, each stone containing the name of one of the tribes. It was held in position by the ephod, which consisted of another piece of cloth, with a back and front part, which were united into one on the shoulders. On each shoulder it was clasped by an onyx stone bearing the names of six of the tribes. Thus twice, on the shoulders, the seat of power, and on the heart, the organ of thought and of love, Aaron, entering into the presence of the Most High, bore "the names of the tribes for a memorial continually."

Now, I think we shall not be indulging in the very dangerous amusement of unduly spiritualising the externalities of that old law if we see here, in these two things, some very important lessons.

I.—The first one that I would suggest to you is —here we have the expression of the great truth of representation of the people by the priest.

The names of the tribes laid upon Aaron's heart and on his shoulders indicated the significance of his office —that he represented Israel before God, as truly as he represented God to Israel. For the moment the personality of the official was altogether melted away and absorbed in the sanctity of his function, and he stood before God as the individualised nation. Aaron was Israel, and Israel was Aaron, for the purposes of worship. And that was indicated by the fact that here, on the shoulders, from which, according to an obvious symbol, all acts of power emanate, and on the heart, from which, according to most natural metaphor, all the outgoings of the personal life proceed, were written the names of the tribes. That meant, "This man standing here is the Israel of God, the concentrated nation."

The same thought works the other way. The nation is the diffused priest, and all its individual components are consecrated to God. All this was external ceremonial, with no real spiritual fact at the back of it. But it pointed onwards to something that is not ceremonial. It pointed to this, that the true priest must, in like manner, gather up into himself, and in a very profound sense be, the people for whom he is the priest ; and that they, in their turn, by the action of

their own minds and hearts and wills, must consent to and recognise that representative relation, which comes to the solemn height of identification in Christ's relation to His people. "I am the Vine, ye are the branches," says He, and also, "That they all may be one in us as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee." So Paul says, "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." "The life which I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God."

So Christ gathers us all, if we will let Him, into Himself; and our lives may be hid with Him—in a fashion that is more than mere external and formal representation, as people have a member of Parliament to represent them in the councils of the nation—even in a true union with Him in whom is the life of all of us, if we live in any real sense. Aaron bore the names of the tribes on shoulder and heart, and Israel was Aaron, and Aaron was Israel.

II.—Further, we see here, in these eloquent symbols, the true significance of intercession:

Now, that is a word and a thought which has been wofully limited and made shallow and superficial by the unfortunate confining of the expression, in our ordinary language, to a mere action by speech. Intercession is supposed to be verbal asking for some good to be bestowed on, or some evil to be averted from, someone in whom we are interested. But the Old Testament notion of the priest's intercession, and the New Testament use of the word which we so render, go far beyond any verbal utterances, and reach to the very heart of things. Intercession, in the true sense of the word, means the doing of any act whatsoever

before God for His people by Jesus Christ. Whenever, as in the presence of God, He brings to God anything which is His, that is intercession. He undertakes for them, not by words only, though His mighty word is, "I will that they whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am," but by acts which are more than even the words of the Incarnate Word.

If we take these two inscriptions upon which I am now commenting, we shall get, I think, what covers the whole ground of the intercession on which Christians are to repose their souls. For, with regard to the one of them, we read that the high priest's breastplate was named "the breastplate of judgment"; and what that means is explained by the last words of the verse following that from which my text is taken: "Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the Lord." Judgment means a judicial sentence; in this case a judicial sentence of acquittal. And that Aaron stood before God in the Holy Place, ministering with this breastplate upon his heart, is explained by the writer of these regulations to mean that he carried there the visible manifestation of Israel's acquittal, based upon his own sacrificial function. Now, put that into plain English, and it is just this—Jesus Christ's sacrifice ensures, for all those whose names are written on these gems on His heart, their acquittal in the judgment of Heaven. Or, in other words, the first step in the intercession of our great High Priest is the presenting before God for ever and ever that great fact that He, the Sinless, has died for the love of sinful men, and thereby has secured that the judgment

of Heaven on them shall now be "no condemnation." Brethren, there is the root of all our hope in Christ, and of all that Christ is to individuals and to society—the assurance that the breastplate of judgment is on His heart, as a sign that all who trust Him are acquitted by the tribunal of Heaven.

The other side of this great continual act of intercession is set forth by the other symbol—the names written on the shoulders, the seat of power. There is a beautiful parallel, which yet at first sight does not seem to be one, to the thought that lies here in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, where, addressing the restored and perfected Israel, he says, speaking in the person of Jehovah: "I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands." That has precisely the same meaning that I take to be conveyed by this symbol in the text. The names of the tribes are written on His shoulders; and not until that arm is wearied or palsied, not till that strong hand forgets its cunning, shall our defence fail. If our names are thus written on the seat of power, that means that all the Divine authority and omnipotence which Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of the Father, wields in His state of Royal glory, are exercised on behalf of, or at all events on the side of, those whose names He thus bears upon His shoulders. That is the guarantee for each of us that our hands shall be made strong, according to the ancient prophetic blessing, "by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob." Just as a father or a mother will take their child's little tremulous hand in theirs and hold it, that it may be strengthened for some small task beyond its unbacked, uninigorated power;

so Jesus Christ will give us strength within, as well as will order the march of His Providence and send the gift of His Spirit, for the succour and the strengthening of all whose names are written on His ephod. He has gone within the veil. He has left us heavy tasks, but our names are on His shoulders, and we can do all things in Christ that strengtheneth us.

III.—Still further, this symbol suggests to us the depth and reality of Christ's sympathy. The heart is, in our language, the seat of love. It is not so in the Old Testament. Affection is generally allocated to another part of the frame; but here the heart stands for the organ of care, of thought, of interest—and, we may say, of affection. For, according to the Old Testament view of the relation between man's body and man's soul, the very seat and centre of the individual life is in the heart. I suppose that was because they knew that, somehow or other, the blood came thence. Be that as it may, the thought is clear throughout all the Old Testament. The heart is the man; and the man is the heart. And so, if Jesus bears our names upon His heart, that does not express merely representation nor merely intercession, but it expresses also personal regard, individualising knowledge. For Aaron wore not one great jewel with "Israel" written on it, but twelve little ones, with "Dan," "Benjamin," and "Ephraim," and all the rest of them, each on his own gem.

So, we can say: "Such a High Priest became us, who could have compassion upon the ignorant, and upon them that are out of the way"; and we can fall back on that old-fashioned but inexhaustible source

of consolation and strength: "In all their affliction He was afflicted"; and though the noise of the tempests which toss us can scarcely be supposed to penetrate into the veiled place where He dwells on high, yet we may be sure—and take all the peace and consolation and encouragement out of it that it is meant to give us—that "we have not a High Priest that cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities," but Himself, having known miseries, "is able to succour them that are tempted." Our names are on Christ's heart.

IV.—Then, lastly, we have here a suggestion of how precious to Aaron Israel is. Jewels were chosen to symbolise the tribes. Bits of tin, potsherds, or anything else that one could have scratched letters upon would have done quite as well. But "the precious things of the everlasting mountains" were chosen to bear the dear names. "The Lord's portion is His people"; and precious in the eyes of Christ are the souls for which He has given so much. They are not only precious, but lustrous, flashing back the light in various colours indeed, according to their various laws of crystallisation, but all receptive of it and all reflective of it. I said that the names on the breastplate of judgment expressed the acquittal and acceptance of Israel. But does Christ's work for us stop with simple acquittal? Oh no! "Whom He justified them He also glorified." And if our souls are "bound in the bundle of life," and our names are written on the heart of the Christ, be sure that mere forgiveness and acquittal is the least of the blessings which He intends to give, and that He will not be

satisfied until in all our nature we receive and flash back the light of His own glory.

It is very significant in this aspect that the names of the twelve tribes are described as being written on the precious stones which make the walls of the New Jerusalem. Thus borne on Christ's heart whilst He is within the veil and we are in the outer courts, we may hope to be carried by His sustaining and perfecting hand into the glories, and be made participant of the glories. Let us see to it that we write His name on our hearts, on their cares, their thought, their love, and on our hands, on their toiling and their possessing; and then, God helping us, and Christ dwelling in us, we shall come to the blessed state of those who serve Him, and bear His name flaming conspicuous for ever on their foreheads.



XXVII.

Three Inscriptions with one Meaning.

"THOU shalt make a plate of pure gold, and grave upon it, . . .

'Holiness to the Lord.'"—EXODUS xxviii. 36.

"IN that day there shall be upon the bells of the horses, 'Holiness unto the Lord.'"—ZECH. xiv. 20.

"HIS name shall be in their foreheads."—REV. xxii. 4.



YOU will have perceived my purpose in putting these three widely separated texts together. They all speak of inscriptions, and they are all obviously connected with each other. The first of them comes from the ancient times of the institution of the ceremonial ritual, and describes a part of the high priest's official dress. In his mitre was a thin plate of gold on which was written, "Holiness to the Lord." The second of them comes from almost the last portion recorded of the history of Israel in the Old Testament, and is from the words of the great Prophet of the Restoration—his ideal presentation of the Messianic period, in which he recognises as one feature, that the inscription on the mitre of the high priest shall be written on "the bells of the horses." And the last of them is from the closing vision of the celestial kingdom, the heavenly and perfected form of

the Christian Church. John, probably remembering the high priest and his mitre, with its inscription upon the forehead, says, "His servants shall do Him priestly service"—for that is the meaning of the word inadequately translated "serve Him"—"and see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads."

Three things, then—the priest's mitre, the horses' bells, the foreheads of the perfected saints—present three aspects of the Christian thought of holiness. Take them one by one.

I.—The priest's mitre.

The high priest was the official representative of the nation. He stood before God as the embodied and personified Israel. For the purposes of worship Israel was the high priest, and the high priest was Israel. And so, on his forehead, not to distinguish him from the rest of the people, but to include all the people in his consecration, shone a golden plate with the motto, "Holiness to the Lord." So, at the beginning, there stands a protest against all notions that make "saint" the designation of any abnormal or exceptional sanctity, and confine the name to the members of any selected aristocracy of devoutness and goodness. All Christian men, *ex officio*, by the very fact of their Christianity, are saints, in the true sense of the word. And the representative of the whole of Israel stood there before God, with this inscription blazing on his forehead, as a witness that, whatsoever holiness may be, it belongs to every member of the true Israel.

And what is it? It is a very unfortunate thing—indicating superficiality of thought—that the modern

popular notion of "holiness" identifies it with purity, righteousness, moral perfection. Now that idea *is* in it, but is not the whole of it. For, not to spend time upon mere remarks on words, the meaning of the word thus rendered is in Hebrew, as well as in Greek and in our own English, one and the same. The root-meaning is "separated," "set apart," and the word expresses primarily, not moral character, but relation to God. That makes all the difference; and it incalculably deepens the conception, as well as puts us on the right track for understanding the only possible means by which there can ever be realised that moral perfection and excellence which has unfortunately monopolised the meaning of the word in most people's minds. The first thought is "set apart to God." That is holiness, in its root and germ.

And how can we be set apart for God? You may devote a dead thing for certain uses easily enough. How can a man be separated and laid aside?

Well, there is only one way, brethren, and that is by self-surrender. "Yield yourselves to God" is but the other side, or, rather, the practical shape, of the Old and the New Testament doctrine of holiness. A man becomes God's when he says, "Lord, take me and mould me, and fill me and cleanse me, and do with me what Thou wilt." In that self-surrender, which is the tap-root of all holiness, the first and foremost thing to be offered is that most obstinate of all, the will that is in us. And when we yield our wills in submission both to commandments and providences, both to gifts and to withdrawals, both to gains and to losses, both to joys and to sorrows, then we begin to

write upon our foreheads "Holiness to the Lord." And when we go on to yield our hearts to Him, by enshrining Him sole and sovereign in their innermost chamber, and turning to Him the whole current of our lives and desires, and hopes and confidences, which we are so apt to allow to run to waste and be sucked up in the desert sands of the world, then we write more of that inscription. And when we fill our minds with joyful submission to His truth, and occupy our thoughts with His mighty name and His great revelation, and carry Him with us in the hidden corners of our consciousness, even whilst we are busy about daily work, then we add further letters to it. And when the submissive will, and the devoted heart, and the occupied thoughts are fully expressed in daily life and its various external duties, then the writing is complete. "Holiness to the Lord" is self-surrender of will, and heart, and mind, and everything. And that surrender is of the very essence of Christianity.

What is a saint? Some man or woman that has practised unheard-of austerities? Somebody that has lived an isolated and self-regarding life in convent or monastery or desert? No! a man or woman in the world who, moved by the mercies of God, yields self to God as a living sacrifice.

So the New Testament writers never hesitate to speak even of such very imperfect Christians as were found in abundance in churches like Corinth and Galatia as being all "saints," every man of them. That is not because the writers were minimising their defects, or idealising their persons, but because, if they are Christians at all, they are saints; seeing that

no man is a Christian who has not been drawn by Christ's great sacrifice for him to yield himself a sacrifice for Christ.

Of course that intrusive idea which has, in popular apprehension, so swallowed up the notion of holiness —viz., that of perfection of moral character or conduct—is included in this other, or rather is developed from it. Because the true way to conquer self is to surrender self; and the more entire our giving up of ourselves, the more certainly shall we receive ourselves back again from His hands. “By the mercies of God, I beseech you, yield yourselves living sacrifices.”

II.—I come to my next text—the horses' bells.

Zechariah has a vision of the ideal Messianic times, and, of course, as must necessarily be the case, his picture is painted with colours laid upon his palette by his experience, and he depicts that distant future in the guise suggested to him by what he saw around him. So we have to disentangle from his words the sentiment which he expresses, and to recognise the symbolic way in which he puts it. His thought is this. The inscription of the high priest's mitre shall be written on the bells which ornament the harness of the horses, which in Israel were never used as with us, but only either for war or for pomp and display, and the use of which was always regarded with a certain kind of doubt and suspicion. Even these shall be consecrated in that far-off day.

And then he goes on with variations on the same air, “In that day there shall be upon the bells of the horses, ‘Holiness unto the Lord,’ ” and adds that

"the pots in the Lord's house"—the humble vessels that were used for the most ordinary parts of the Temple services—"shall be like the bowls before the altar," into which the sacred blood of the offerings was poured. The most external and secular thing bearing upon religion shall be as sacred as the sacredest. But that is not all. "Yea! every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness unto the Lord of hosts, and all they that sacrifice shall come and take of them," and put their offerings therein. That is to say, the coarse pottery vessels that were in every poverty-stricken house in the city shall be elevated to the rank of the sacred vessels of the Temple. Domestic life with all its secularities shall be hallowed. The kitchens of Jerusalem shall be as truly places of worship as is the inner shrine of the Most High.

On the whole, the prophet's teaching is that, in the ideal state of man upon earth, there shall be an entire abolition of the distinction between "sacred" and "secular"; a distinction that has wrought infinite mischief in the world, and in the lives of Christian people.

Let me translate these words of our prophet into English equivalents. Every cup and tumbler in a poor man's kitchen may be as sacred as the Communion chalice that passes from lip to lip with the "blood of Jesus Christ" in it. Every common piece of service that we do, down among the vulgarities and the secularities and the meannesses of daily life, may be lifted up to stand upon precisely the same level as the sacredest office that we undertake. The bells of the horses may jingle to the same tune as the

trumpets of the priests within the shrine, and on all, great and small, may be written, "Holiness to the Lord."

But let us remember that that universally diffused sanctity will need to have a centre of diffusion, else there will be no diffusion, and that all life will become sacred when the man that lives it has "Holiness to the Lord" written on his forehead, and not else. If that be the inscription on the driver's heart, the horses that he drives will have it written on their bells, but they will not have it unless it be. Holy men make all things holy. "To the pure all things are pure," but unto them that are unclean and disobedient there is nothing pure. Hallow thyself, and all things are clean unto thee.

III.—And so I come to my third text—the perfected saints' foreheads.

The connection between the first and the last of these texts is as plain and close as between the first and the second. For John in his closing vision gives emphasis to the priestly idea as designating in its deepest relations the redeemed and perfected Christian Church. Therefore he says, as I have already explained, "His servants shall do Him priestly service, and His name shall be in their foreheads." The old official dress of the high priest comes into his mind, and he paints the future, just as Zechariah did, under the forms of the past, and sees before the throne the perfected saints, each man of them with that inscription clear and conspicuous.

But there is an advance in his words which I think it is not fanciful to note. It is only the *name* that is

written in the perfected saint's forehead. Not the "Holiness unto the Lord," but just the bare name. What does that mean? Well, it means the same as your writing your name in one of your books does, or as when a man puts his initials on the back of his oxen, or as the old practice of branding the master's mark upon the slave did. It means absolute ownership.

But it means something more. The name is the manifested personality, the revealed God, or, as we say in an abstract way, the character of God. That name is to be in the foreheads of His perfected people. How does it come to be there? Read the clause before. "His servants shall see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads." That is to say, the perfected condition is not reached by surrender only, but by assimilation; and that assimilation comes by contemplation. The faces that are turned to Him, and behold Him, are smitten with the light and shine, and those that look upon them see "as it had been the face of an angel," as the Sanhedrim saw that of Stephen, when he beheld the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

My last text is but a picturesque way of saying what the writer of it says in plain words when he declares, "We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." The name is to be "in their foreheads," where everybody can see it. Alas! alas! it is so hard for us to live out our best selves, and to show to the world what is in us. Cowardice, sheepishness, and a hundred other reasons prevent it. In this poor imperfect state no emotion ever takes shape and

visibility without losing more or less of its beauty. But yonder the obstructions to self-manifestation will be done away ; and " when He shall be manifested, we also shall be manifested with Him in glory."

" Then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in My heavenly Father's Kingdom." But the beginning of it all is " Holiness to the Lord " written on our hearts ; and the end of that is the vision which is impossible without holiness, and which leads on to the beholder's perfect likeness to his Lord.



XXVIII.

The Weight of Sand.

"SAND is weighty."—PROVERBS xxxii. 3.



HIS Book of Proverbs has a very wholesome horror of the character which it calls "a fool"; meaning thereby, not so much intellectual feebleness as moral and religious obliquity, which are the stupidest things that a man can be guilty of. My text comes from a very picturesque and vivid description, by way of comparison, of the fatal effects of such a man's passion. The proverb-maker compares two heavy things, stones and sand, and says that they are feathers in comparison with the immense lead-like weight of such a man's wrath.

Now I have nothing more to do with the immediate application of my text. I want to make a parable out of it. What is lighter than a grain of sand? What is heavier than a bagful of it? As the grains fall one by one, how easily they can be blown away! Let them gather, and they bury temples, and crush the solid masonry of pyramids. "Sand is weighty." The accumulation of light things is overwhelmingly ponderous. Are there any such things

in our lives? If there are, what ought we to do? So you get the point of view from which I want to look at the words this evening.

I.—The first suggestion that I make is that they remind us of the supreme importance of trifles.

If trivial acts are unimportant, what signifies the life of man? For ninety-nine and a half per cent. of every man's life is made up of these light nothings; and unless there is potential greatness in them, and they are of importance, then life is all "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Small things make life; and if they are small, then it is.

But remember, too, that the supreme importance of so-called trivial actions is seen in this, that there may be every bit as much of the noblest things that belong to humanity condensed in, and brought to bear upon, the veriest trifle that a man can do, as on the greatest things that he can perform. We are very poor judges of what is great and what is little. We have a very vulgar estimate that noise and notoriety and the securing of, not *great* but "big," results of a material kind make the deeds, by which they are secured, great ones. And we think that it is the quiet things, those that do not tell outside at all, that are the small ones.

Well! here is a picture for you. Half a dozen shabby, travel-stained Jews, sitting by a river-side upon the grass, talking to a handful of women outside the gates of a great city. Years before that, there had been what the world calls a great event, almost on the same ground—a sanguinary fight, that had settled the emperorship of the then civilised world, for a time.

I want to know whether the first preaching of the Gospel in Europe by the Apostle Paul, or the battle of Philippi, was the great event, and which of the two was the little one. I vote for the Jews on the grass, and let all the noise of the fight, though it reverberated through the world for a bit, die away, as "a little dust that rises up, and is lightly laid again." Not the noisy events are the great ones; and as much true greatness may be manifested in a poor woman stitching in her garret as in some of the things that have rung through the world and excited all manner of vulgar applause. Trifles may be, and often are, the great things in life.

And then remember, too, how the most trivial actions have a strange knack of all at once leading on to large results, beyond what could have been expected. A man shifts his seat in a railway carriage, from some passing whim, and five minutes afterwards there comes a collision, and the bench where he had been sitting is splintered up, and the place where he is sitting is untouched, and the accidental move has saved his life. According to the old story a boy, failing in applying for a situation, stoops down in the courtyard and picks up a pin, and the millionaire sees him through the window, and it makes his fortune. We cannot tell what may come of anything; and since we do not know the far end of our deeds, let us be quite sure that we have got the near end of them right. Whatever may be the issue, let us look after the motive, and then all will be right. Small seeds grow to be great trees, and in this strange and inexplicable network of things which men call circum-

stances, and Christians call Providence, the only thing certain is that "great" and "small" all but cease to be a tenable, and certainly altogether cease to be an important, distinction.

Then another thing which I would have you remember is, that it is these trivial actions which, in their accumulated force, make character. Men are not made by crises. The crises reveal what we have made ourselves by the trifles. The way in which we do the little things forms the character according to which we shall act when the great things come. If the crew of a man-of-war were not exercised at boat and fire drill during many a calm day, when all was safe, what would become of them when tempests were raging, or flames breaking through the bulkheads? It is no time to learn drill then. And we must make our characters by the way in which, day out and day in, we do little things, and find in them fields for the great virtues which will enable us to front the crises of our fate unblenching, and to master whatsoever difficulties come in our path. Geologists nowadays distrust, for the most part, theories which have to invoke great forces in order to mould the face of a country. They tell us that the valley, with its deep sides and wide opening to the sky, may have been made by the slow operation of a tiny brooklet that trickles now down at its base, and by erosion of the atmosphere. So we shape ourselves—and that is a great thing--by the way we do small things.

Therefore, I say to you, dear friends, think solemnly and reverently of this awful life of ours. Clear your minds of the notion that anything is small which

offers to you the alternative of being done in a right way or in a wrong; and recognise this as a fact—"sand is weighty," trifles are of supreme importance.

II.—Now, secondly, let me ask you to take this saying as suggesting the overwhelming weight of small sins.

That is only an application in one direction of the general principle that I have been trying to lay down; but it is one of such great importance that I wish to deal with it separately. And my point is this, that the accumulated pressure upon a man of a multitude of perfectly trivial faults and transgressions makes up a tremendous aggregate that weighs upon him with awful ponderousness.

Let me remind you, to begin with, that, properly speaking, the words "great" and "small" should not be applied in reference to things about which "right" or "wrong" are the proper words to employ. Or, to put it into plainer language, it is as absurd to talk about the "size" of a sin, as it is to take the superficial area of a picture as a test of its greatness. The magnitude of a transgression does not depend on the greatness of the act which transgresses—according to human standards—but on the intensity with which the sinful element is working in it. For acts make crimes, but motives make sins. If you take a bit of prussic acid, and bruise it down, every little microscopic fragment will have the poisonous principle in it; and it is very irrelevant to ask whether it is as big as a mountain or small as a grain of dust, it is poison all the same. So to talk about magnitude, in regard to sins, is rather to introduce a foreign consideration.

But still, recognising that there is a reality in the distinction that people make between great sins and small ones, though it is a superficial distinction, and does not go down to the bottom of things, let us deal with it now.

I say, then, that small sins, by reason of their numerousness, have a terrible accumulative power. They are like the green flies on our rose bushes, or the microbes that our medical friends talk so much about nowadays. Like them, their power of mischief does not in the least degree depend on their magnitude, and, like them, they have a tremendous capacity of reproduction. It would be easier to find a man that had not done any one sin than to find out a man that had only done it once. And it would be easier to find a man that had done no evil than a man who had not been obliged to make the second edition of his sin an enlarged one. For this is the present Nemesis of all evil, that it requires repetition, partly to still conscience, partly to satisfy excited tastes and desires ; so that animal indulgence in drink and the like is a type of what goes on in the inner life of every man, in so far as the second dose has to be stronger than the first in order to produce an equivalent effect ; and so on *ad infinitum*.

And then remember that all our evil doings, however insignificant they may be, have a strange affinity with one another, so that you will find that to go wrong in one direction almost inevitably leads to a whole series of consequential transgressions of one sort or another. You remember the old story about the soldier that was smuggled into a fortress con-

cealed in a hay cart, and opened the gates of a virgin citadel to his allies outside. Every evil thing, great or small, that we admit into our lives, still more into our hearts, is charged with the same errand as he had:—"Set wide the door when you are inside, and let us all come in after you." "He taketh with him seven other spirits worse than himself, and they dwell there." "None of them," says one of the prophets, describing the doleful creatures that haunt the ruins of a deserted city, "shall by any means want its mate," and the satyrs of the islands and of the woods join together, and hold high carnival in the city. And so, brethren, our little transgressions open the door for great ones, and every sin makes us more accessible to the assaults of every other.

So let me remind you how here, in these little unnumbered acts of trivial transgression which scarcely produce any effect on conscience or on memory, but make up so large a portion of so many of our lives, lies one of the most powerful instruments for making us what we are. If we indulge in slight acts of transgression, be sure of this, that we shall pass from them to far greater ones. For one man that leaps or falls all at once into sin which the world calls gross, there are a thousand that slide into it. The storm only blows down the trees whose hearts have been eaten out and their roots loosened. And when you see a man having a reputation for wisdom and honour all at once coming crash down and disclosing his baseness, be sure that he began with small deflections from the path of right. The evil works underground; and if we yield to little

temptations, when great ones come we shall fall their victims.

Let me remind you, too, that there is another sense in which "sand is weighty." You may as well be crushed under a sandhill as under a mountain of marble. It matters not which. The accumulated weight of the one is as great as that of the other. And I wish to lay upon the consciences of all that are listening to me now this thought, that an overwhelming weight of guilt results from the accumulation of little sins. Dear friends, I do not desire to preach a gospel of fear, but I cannot help feeling that, very largely, in this day, the ministration of the Christian Church is defective in that it does not give sufficient, though sad and sympathetic, prominence to the plain teaching of Christ and of the New Testament as to future retribution for present sin. We shall "every one of us give account of himself to God"; and if the account is long enough it will foot up to an enormous sum, though each item may be only halfpence. The weight of a lifetime of little sins will be enough to crush a man down with guilt and responsibility when he stands before that Judge. That is all true, and you know it, and I beseech you, take it to your hearts, "Sand is weighty." Little sins have to be accounted for, and may crush.

III.—And now, lastly, let me ask you to consider one or two of the plain, practical issues of such thoughts as these.

And, first, I would say that these considerations set in a very clear light the absolute necessity for all-round and ever-watchful watchfulness over ourselves.

A man in the tropics does not say, "Mosquitoes are so small that it does not matter if two or three of them get inside my bed-curtains." He takes care that not one is there before he lays himself down to sleep. There seems to me nothing more sad than the complacent, easy-going way in which men allow themselves to keep their higher moral principles and their more rigid self-examination for the "great" things, as they suppose, and let the little things often take care of themselves. What would you think of the captain of a steamer who in calm weather sailed by rule of thumb, only getting out his sextant when storms began to blow? And what about a man that lets the myriad trivialities that make up a day pass in and out of his heart as they will, and never arrests any of them at the gate with a "How camest thou in hither?" "Look after the pence, and the pounds will look after themselves." Look after your trivial acts, and, take my word for it, the great ones will be as they ought to be.

Again, may not this thought somewhat take down our easy-going and self-complacent estimate of ourselves? I have no doubt that there are a number of people in my audience this evening who have been more or less consciously saying to themselves whilst I have been going on, "What have *I* to do with all this talk about sin, sin, sin? I am a decent kind of a man. I do all the duties of my daily life, and nobody can say that the white of my eyes is black. I have done no great transgressions. What is it all about? It has nothing to do with me."

Well, my friend, it has this to do with you—that in

your life there are a whole host of things which only a very superficial estimate hinders you from recognising to be what they are—small deeds, but great sins. Is it a small thing to go, as some of you do go, on from year to year, with your conduct and your thoughts and your loves and your desires utterly unaffected by the fact that there is a God in heaven, and that Jesus Christ died for you? Is that a small thing? It manifests itself in a great many insignificant actions. That I grant you; and you are a most respectable man, and you keep the Commandments as well as you can. But “the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified.” I say that that is not a small sin.

So, dear brethren, I beseech you judge yourselves by this standard. I charge none of you with gross iniquities. I know nothing about that. But I do appeal to you all, as I do to myself, whether we must not recognise the fact that an accumulated multitude of transgressions which are only superficially small, in their aggregate weigh upon us with “a weight heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.”

Last of all, this being the case, should we not all turn ourselves with lowly hearts, with recognition of our transgressions, acknowledging that whether it be five hundred or fifty pence that we owe, we have nothing to pay, and betake ourselves to Him who alone can deliver us from the habit and power of these small accumulated faults, and who alone can lift the burden of guilt and responsibility from off our shoulders? If you irrigate the sand it becomes fruitful soil. Christ brings to us the river of the water of

life; the inspiring, the quickening, the fructifying power of the new life that He bestows, and the sand may become soil, and the wilderness blossom as the rose. A heavy burden lies on our shoulders. Ah! yes! but "behold the Lamb of God that beareth away the sins of the world." What was it that crushed Him down beneath the olives of Gethsemane? What was it that made Him cry, "My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?" I know no answer but one, for which the world's gratitude is all too small. "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

"Sand is weighty." Christ has borne the burden. Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and it will drop from your emancipated shoulders, and they will henceforth bear only the light burden of His love.



XXIX.

A Soul's Tragedy.

"**T**HEN Herod questioned with Jesus in many words, but He answered him nothing."—LUKE xxiii. 9.

OUR Herods play their parts in the New Testament story. The first of them is the grim old tiger who slew the infants at Bethlehem, and soon after died. This Herod is the second—a cub of the litter, with his father's ferocity and lust, but without his force. The third is the Herod of the earlier part of the Acts of the Apostles, a grandson of the old man, who dipped his hands in the blood of one apostle, and would fain have slain another. And the last is Herod Agrippa, a son of the third, who is only remembered because he once came across Paul's path, and thought it such a good jest that anything should be supposed capable of making a Christian out of *him*.

There is a singular family likeness in the whole of them, and a very ugly likeness it is. This one was sensual, cruel, cunning, infirm of purpose, capricious like a child or a savage. Roman policy amused him with letting him play at being a ruler, but kept him

well in hand. And I suppose he was made a worse man by the difficulties of his position as a subject-prince.

Now I wish to put together the various incidents in this man's life recorded in the Gospels, and try to gather some lessons from them for you.

I.—First, I take him as an example of half-and-half convictions, and of the inner discord that comes from these.

I do not need to remind you of the shameful story of his repudiation of his own wife, and of his disgusting alliance with the wife of his half-brother, who was herself his niece. She was the stronger spirit, a Biblical Lady Macbeth, the Jezebel to this Ahab; and, to complete the parallel, Elijah was not far away. John the Baptist's outspoken remonstrances of course made an implacable enemy of Herodias, who did all she could to compass his death, but was unable to manage that, though she secured his imprisonment. The reason for her inability is given by the Evangelist Mark, in words which are very inadequately rendered by our Authorised Version, but may be found more correctly translated in the Revised Version. It is there said that King "Herod feared John"—the gaoler afraid of his prisoner! "Knowing that he was a just man and a holy"—goodness is awful. The worst men know it, and it extorts respect. "And kept him safe"—from Herodias, that is. "And when he heard him he was perplexed"—drawn this way and that way by these two magnets, alternately veering to lust and to purity, hesitating between the kisses of the beautiful

temptress at his side and the words of the prophet. And yet, with strange inconsistency, in all his vacillations "he heard him gladly"; for his better part approved the nobler voice. And so he staggered on, having religion enough to spoil some of his sinful delights, but not enough to make him shake them off.

That is a picture for which in its essence many a man and woman in this congregation might have sat. For I suppose that there is nothing more common than these half-and-half convictions which, like inefficient bullets, get part way through the armoured shell of a ship, and there stick harmless. Many of us have the clearest convictions in our understandings, which have never penetrated to that innermost chamber of all, where the will sits sovereign. It is so about little things, it is so about great ones. Nothing is more common than that a man shall know perfectly well that some possibly trivial habit stands in the way of something that it is his interest or his duty to pursue; but the knowledge lies inoperative in the outermost part of him. It is so in regard to graver things. The majority of the slaves of any vice whatsoever know perfectly well that they ought to give it up, and yet nothing comes of the conviction.

"He was much perplexed." What a picture that is of the state of unrest and conflict into which such half-and-half impressions of duty cast a man. Such a one is like a vessel with its head now east, now west, because there is some weak or ignorant steersman at the helm. I know nothing more sure to produce inward unrest and disturbance and desolation than that a man's knowledge of duty should

be clear, and his obedience to that knowledge partial. If we have John down in the dungeon, if conscience is not allowed to be master, there may be feasting and revelry going on above, but the stern voice will come up through the grating now and then, and that will spoil all the laughter. "When he heard him, he was much perplexed."

The reason for these imperfect convictions is generally found, as Herod shows us, in the unwillingness to get rid of something which has fastened its claws around us, and which we love too well, although we know it is a serpent, to shake off. If Herod had once been man enough to screw himself up, and say to Herodias, "Now you pack, and go about your business!" everything else would have come right in time. But he could not make up his mind to sacrifice the honeyed poison, and so everything went wrong in time. My friend, how many of us are prevented from following out our clearest convictions because they demand a sacrifice? "If thine eye cause thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee. It is better for thee."

And then, further, note that these irresolute convictions and shirking of plain duty are not atoned for by, though they are often accompanied with, a strange acquiescence in, and approval of, God's truth. Herod fancied, inconsistently enough, that he was making some kind of compensation for disobedience to the message, by liking to listen to the messenger. And there are a great many of us, all whose Christianity consists in giving ear to the words which we never think of obeying. I wonder how many of you there

are this evening who fancy that you have no more concern with this sermon of mine than approving or disapproving of it, as the case may be; and how many of us there are who, all our lives long, have substituted criticism of the Gospel as ministered by us poor preachers—be it approving or disapproving criticism—for obedience to the Christ and acceptance of His salvation.

II.—We see in Herod an example of the utter powerlessness of such partial convictions and reformation.

I am not going to tell over again the ghastly story of John's death, which no other words than the Evangelist's can tell half so powerfully. I need only remind you of the degradation of the poor child Salome to the position of a dancing girl, the half-topsy generosity of the excited monarch, the grim request from lips so young and still reddened by the excitement of the dance, Herod's unavailing sorrow, his fantastic sense of honour which scrupled to break a wicked promise, but did not scruple to kill a righteous man, and the ghastly picture of the girl carrying the bleeding head—such a gift!—to her mother.

But out of all that jumble of lust and blood I desire to gather one lesson. There you have—in an extreme form, it is true—a tremendous illustration of what half-and-half convictions may come to. Whether or no we ever get anything like as far on the road as this man did matters very little. The process which brought him there is the thing that I seek to point to. It was because he had so long

tampered with the voice of his conscience that it was lulled into silence at that last critical moment. And this is always the case, that if a man is false to the feeblest conviction that he has in regard to the smallest duty, he is a worse man all over ever after. We cannot neglect any conviction of what we ought to do, without lowering the whole tone of our characters and laying ourselves open to assaults of evil from which we would once have turned shuddering and disgusted. A partial thaw is generally followed by intenser frost. An abortive insurrection is sure to issue in a more grinding tyranny. A soul half melted and then cooled off is less easy to melt than it was before. And so, dear brethren, remember this, that if you do not swiftly and fully carry out in life and conduct whatsoever you know you ought to be or do, you cannot set a limit to what, some time or other, if a strong and sudden temptation is sprung upon you, you may become. "Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?" Yes! But he did it. No mortal reaches the extreme of evil all at once, says the wise old proverb; and the path by which a man is let down into depths that he never thought it was possible that he should traverse is by the continual neglect of the small admonitions of conscience. Neglected convictions mean, sooner or later, an outburst of evil.

John's murder may illustrate another thing too—viz., how simple, facile weakness of character may be the parent of all enormities. Herod did not want to kill John. He very much wanted to keep him alive. But he was not man enough to put his foot down, and

say, "There! I have said it; and there is to be no more talk about slaying this prophet of God." So the continual drop, drop, drop, of Herodias' suggestions and wishes wore a hole in the loose-textured stone at last; and he did the thing that he hated to do and had long fought against. Why? Because he was a poor weak creature.

The lesson from this is one that I would urge upon all you young people especially, that in a world like this, where there are so many more voices soliciting us to evil than inviting us to good, to be weak is, in the long run, to be wicked. So do you cultivate the wholesome habit of saying "No," and do not be afraid of anything but of hurting your conscience and sinning against God.

III.—Once more, we have in Herod an example of the awakening of conscience.

When Jesus began to be talked about beyond the narrow limits of the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and especially when he began to organise the Apostolate, and His name was spread abroad, some rumours reached even the court, and there were divergent opinions about him. One man said, It is Elias; and another said, It is a prophet. "And Herod said, It is John, whom I beheaded. He has risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do show forth themselves in him."

Ah, brethren, when a man has, away back in the chambers of his memory, some wrong thing, be it great or be it little, he is at the mercy of any chance or accident to have it revived in all its vividness. It is an awful thing to walk this world with a whole magazine

of combustibles in our memories, on which any spark may fall and set up lurid and sulphurous flames. A chance thing may do it, a scent, a look upon a face, a sound, or any trifle may bring all at once before the wrongdoer that ancient evil. And no lapse of time makes it less dreadful when it is unveiled. The chance thrust of a boat-hook that gets tangled in the grey hairs of a corpse, brings it up grim to the surface. Press a button, by accident, upon a wall in some old castle, and a door flies open that leads away down into black depths. You and I have depths of that sort in our hearts. Then there are no more illusions about whose fault the deed was. When Herod killed John, he said, "Oh! It is not I! It is Herodias. It is Salome. It is my oath. It is the respect I bear to the people who heard me swear. I must do it, but I am not responsible." But when, in "the sessions of silent thought," the deed came back to him, Salome and Herodias, the oath, and the company were all out of sight, and he said, "I! *I* did it."

That is what we all shall have to do some day, in this world possibly, in the next certainly. Men sophisticate themselves with talk about palliations, and excuses, and temptations, and companions, and the like. And philosophers sophisticate themselves nowadays with a great many learned explanations, which tend to show that a man is not to blame for the wrong things he does. But all that rubbish gets burned up when conscience wakes, and the doer says, "Whom *I* beheaded."

Brethren, unless we take refuge in the great sacrifice

for the sins of the world which Jesus Christ has made, we shall, possibly in this life, and certainly hereafter, be surrounded by a company of our own evil deeds risen from the dead, and every one of them will shake his gory locks at us, and say, "*Thou didst it.*"

IV.—The last lesson that I gather from this man's life is the final insensibility which these half-and-half convictions tend to produce.

Jesus Christ was sent by Pilate to Herod as a kind of peace-offering. The two had been squabbling about some question of jurisdiction ; and so, partly to escape from the embarrassment of having to deal with this enigmatical Prisoner, and partly out of a piece of politic politeness, Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, because He was in his jurisdiction. Think of the Lord of men and angels being handed about from one to the other of these two scoundrels, as a piece of politeness !

When Christ stands before Herod, note that all its former convictions, partial or entire, and all its terrors, superficial or deep, have faded clean away from this frivolous soul. All that he feels now is a childish delight in having this well-known Man before him, and a hope that, for his delectation, Jesus will work a miracle ; much as he might expect a conjuror to do one of his tricks ! That is what killing John came to—an incapacity to see anything in Jesus.

"And he asked Him many questions, and Jesus answered him nothing." He locked His lips. Why ? He was doing what He Himself enjoined : "Give not that which is holy to the dogs. Cast not your pearls before swine." He said nothing, because He knew it was useless to say anything. So the Incarnate

Word, whose very nature and property it is to speak, was silent before the frivolous curiosity of the man that had been false to his deepest convictions.

It is a parable, brother, of what is being repeated over and over again amongst us. I dare not say that Jesus Christ is ever absolutely dumb to any man on this side of the grave; but I dare not refrain from saying that this condition of insensibility to His words is one that we may indefinitely approach to, and that the surest way to approach to it and to reach it is to fight down, or to neglect, the convictions that lead up to Him. John was the forerunner of Christ, and if Herod had listened to John, to him John would have said : "Behold the Lamb of God!" To you I say it, and beseech you to take that Lamb of God for the Sacrifice of your sins, for the Healer and Cleanser of your memories and your consciences, for the Helper who will enable you to make all sacrifices to duty joyfully, and to carry into effect every conviction which His own merciful hand writes upon your hearts.

And oh, dear friends, many of you strangers to me, to whom my voice seldom comes, let me plead with you not to be content with "hearing" any of us "gladly," but to do what our words point to, and to follow Christ the Saviour. If you hear the Gospel, however imperfectly, as you are hearing it proclaimed now, and if you neglect it as—must I say?—you are doing now, you will bring another film over your eyes which may grow thick enough to shut out all the light; you will wind another fold above your hearts which may prove impenetrable to the sword of the

Spirit ; you will put another plug in your ears which may make them deaf to the music of Christ's voice. Do what you know you ought to do, yield yourselves to Jesus Christ. And do it now, whilst impressions are being made, lest, if you let them sleep, they may never return. Felix trembled when Paul reasoned ; but he waved away the messenger and the message, and though he sent for Paul often, and communed with him, he never trembled any more.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood,"

would lead us into the haven of rest in Christ ; and, if allowed to pass, may leave us, stranded and shipwrecked, among the rocks.



XXX.

The Gifts that Accompany Forgiveness.

"BRING forth the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it."—LUKE xv. 22, 23.



OD'S giving always follows His forgiving. It is not so with us. We think ourselves very magnanimous when we pardon; and we seldom go on to lavish favours where we have overlooked faults. Perhaps it is right that men who have offended against men should earn restoration by acts, and should have to ride quarantine, as it were, for a time: But I question whether forgiveness is ever true which is not, like God's, attended by large-hearted gifts. If pardon is only the non-infliction of penalty, then it is natural enough that it should be considered sufficient by itself, and that the evildoer should not be rewarded for having been bad. But if pardon is the outflow of the love of the offended to the offender, then it can scarcely be content with simply giving the debtor his discharge, and turning him into the world penniless.

However that may be with regard to men, God's forgiveness is essentially the communication of God's

love to us sinners, as if we had never sinned at all. And, that being so, that love cannot stay its working until it has given all that it can bestow or we can receive. God does not do things by halves ; and He always gives when He forgives.

Now that is the great truth of the last part of this immortal parable. And it is one of the points in which it differs from, and towers high above, the two preceding ones. The lost sheep was carried back to the pastures, turned loose there, needed no further special care, and began to nibble as if nothing had happened. The lost drachma was simply put back in the woman's purse. But the lost son was pardoned, and, being pardoned, was capable of receiving, and received, greater gifts than he had before. These gifts are very remarkably detailed in the words of our text.

Now, of course, it is always risky to seek for a spiritual interpretation of every point in a parable, many of which points are mere drapery. But, on the other hand, we may very easily fall into the error of treating as insignificant details which really are meant to be full of instruction. And I cannot help thinking—although many would differ from me—that this detailed enumeration of the gifts to the Prodigal is meant to be translated into the terms of spiritual experience. So I desire to look at them as suggesting for us the gifts of God which accompany forgiveness. I take the catalogue as it stands—the Robe, the Ring, the Shoes, the Feast.

I.—First, the Robe.

“ Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him.” That was the command. This detail, of course, like

all the others, refers back to, and casts light upon, the supposed condition of the spendthrift when he came back. There he stood, ragged, with the stain of travel and the stench of the pig-sty upon his garments, some of them, no doubt, remains of the tawdry finery that he had worn in the world ; wine-spots, and stains, and filth of all sorts on the rags. The father says, "Take them all off him, and put the best robe upon him." What does that mean ?

Well, we all know the very familiar metaphor by which qualities of mind, traits of character, and the like are described as being the dress of the spirit. We talk about being "arrayed in purity," "clad in zeal," "clothed with humility," "vested with power," and so on. If we turn to Scripture, we find running through it a whole series of instances of this metaphor, which guide us at once to its true meaning. Zechariah saw in vision the high priest standing at the heavenly tribunal, clad in filthy garments. A voice said, "Take away the filthy garments from him," and the interpretation is added: "Behold ! I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with a change of raiment." You remember our Lord's parable of the man with a wedding garment. You remember the Apostle Paul's frequent use of the metaphor of "putting off the old man, putting on the new." You remember, finally, the visions of the last days, in which the Seer in Patmos saw the armies in heaven that followed their victorious Commander, "clothed in fine linen, white and pure, which is the righteousness of the saints." If we put all these together, surely I am not forcing a meaning on a non-significant

detail, when I say that here we have shadowed for us the great thought, that the result of the Divine forgiveness coming upon a man is that he is clothed with a character which fits him to sit down at his father's table. They tell us that forgiveness is impossible, because things done must have their consequences, and that character is the slow formation of actions, precipitated, as it were, from our deeds. That is all true. But it does not conflict with this other truth that there may and does come into men's hearts, when they set their faith on Jesus Christ, a new power which transforms the nature, and causes old things to pass away.

God's forgiveness revolutionises a life. Similar effects follow even human pardons for small offences. Brute natures are held in by penalties, and to them pardon means impunity, and impunity means licence, and licence means lust. But wherever there is a heart with love to the offended in it, there is nothing that so bows the spirit in loathing of its past self as the assurance that the offended, though loved, one loves, and is not offended, and that free forgiveness has come. Whether is it the rod or the mother's kiss that makes a child hate its sin most? And if we left our thoughts to Him, and think how He, up there in the heavens,

"Who mightest vengeance best have took,"

bends over us in frank, free forgiveness, then surely that, more than all punishments or threatenings or terrors, will cause us to turn away from our evil, and to loathe the sins which are thus forgiven. The prophet

went very deep when he said, "Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thine iniquity, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord."

But not only so, there is given along with forgiveness, and wrapped up in it, a new power, which makes all things new, and changes a man. It would be a poor Gospel for me to stand up and preach if I had only to proclaim to men the Divine forgiveness; and if that only meant that hell's door was barred and some outward heaven was flung open. But the true Gospel offers forgiveness as preliminary to the bestowal of the highest gifts of God. The pardoned man is stripped of his rags and clothed with a new nature which God Himself bestows.

That is what we all need. We have not all been in the pig-sty; we have not all fallen into gross sin. We *have* all turned our backs on our Father; we *have* all wanted to be independent; we *have* all preferred the far-off land to being near home. And, dear brethren, the character that you have made for yourselves clings to you like the poisoned Nessus' shirt to Hercules. You cannot strip it off. You may get part of it away, but you cannot entirely cast it from your limbs, nor free yourselves from the entanglements of its tatters. Go to God, and He will smile away your sin, and His forgiving love will melt the stains and the evil, as the sun this morning drank up the mists; and they who come knowing themselves to be foul, and needing forgiveness, will surely receive from Him "the fine linen white and pure, the righteousness of saints."

II.—The Ring.

This prodigal lad only wanted to be placed in the position of a slave, but his father said, "Put a ring on his finger." The ring is an emblem of wealth, position, honour; that is one signification of this gift to the penitent. Still further, it is an ornament to the hand on which it glistens; that is another. It is a sign of delegated authority and of representative character; as when Joseph was exalted to be the second man in Egypt, and Pharaoh's signet-ring was plucked off and placed upon his finger. All these thoughts are, as it seems to me, clustered in, and fairly deducible from, this one detail.

Freedom, exaltation, dignity of position are expressed. And that opens up a thought which needs to be set forth with many reservations, and much guarding, but still is true—viz., that, by the mercy and miraculous loving-kindness and quickening power of God in the Gospel, it is possible that the lower a man falls the higher he may rise. I know, of course, that it is better to be innocent than to be cleansed. I know, and every man that looks into his own heart knows, that forgiven sins may leave scars; that the memory may be loaded with many a foul and many a painful remembrance; that the fetters may be stricken off the limbs, but the marks of them, and the way of walking that they compelled, may persist long after deliverance. But I know, too, that redeemed men are higher in final position than angels that never fell; and that, though it is too much to say that the greater the sinner the greater the saint, it still remains true that sin repented and forgiven may be, as

it were, an elevation upon which a man may stand to reach higher than, apparently, he otherwise would in the Divine life.

And so, though I do not say to any man, Make the experiment; for, indeed, the poorest of us has sins enough to get all the benefit out of repentance and forgiveness which is included in them, yet, if there is any man here—and I hope there is—saying to himself, “I have got too low down ever to master this, that, or the other evil; I have stained myself so foully that I cannot hope to have the black marks erased,” I say to such: “Remember that the man who ended with a ring on his finger, honoured and dignified, was the man that had herded with pigs, and stank, and all but rotted, with his fleshly crimes.” And so nobody need doubt but that for him, however low he has gone, and however far he has gone, there is restoration possible to a higher dignity than the pure spirits that never transgressed at any time God’s commandment will ever attain; for he who has within himself the experience of repentance, of pardon, and who has come into living contact with Jesus Christ as Redeemer, can teach angels how blessed it is to be a child of God.

Nor less distinctly are the other two things which I have referred to brought out in this metaphor. Not only is the ring the sign of dignity, but it is also the sign of delegated authority and representative character. God sets poor penitents to be His witnesses in His world, and to do His work here. And a ring is an ornament to the hand that wears it; which being translated is this: where God gives pardon, He gives a

strange beauty of character, to which, if a man is true to himself, and to his Redeemer, he will assuredly attain. There should be no lives so lovely, none that flash with so many jewelled colours, as the lives of the men and women who have learned what it is to be miserable, what it is to repent, what it is to be forgiven. So, though our "hands have been full of blood," as the prophet says, though they have dabbled in all manner of pollution, though they have been the ready instruments of many evil things, we may all hope that, cleansed and whitened, our hands will not want the lustre of that adornment which the loving father clasped upon the fingers of his penitent boy.

III.—Further, "Shoes on his feet."

No doubt he had come back barefooted and filthy and bleeding, and it was needful for the "keeping" of the narrative that this detail should appear. But I think it is something more than drapery.

Does it not speak to us of equipment for the walk of life? God *does* prepare men for future service, and for every step that they have to take, by giving to them His forgiveness for all that is past. The sense of the Divine pardon will in itself fit a man, as nothing else will, for running with patience the race that is set before him. God does communicate, along with His forgiveness, to every one who seeks it, actual power to "travel on life's common way in cheerful godliness"; and his feet are "shod with the preparedness of the gospel of peace."

Ah, brethren, life is a rough road for us all, and for those whose faces are set towards duty, and God, and

self-denial, it is especially so, though there are many compensating circumstances. There are places where sharp flints stick up in the path and cut the feet. There are places where rocks jut out for us to stumble over. There are all the trials and sorrows that necessarily attend upon our daily lives, and which sometimes make us feel as if our path were across heated ploughshares, and every step was a separate agony. God will give us, if we go to Him for pardon, that which will defend us against the pains and the sorrows of life. The bare foot is cut by that which the shod foot tramples upon unconscious.

There are foul places on all our paths, over which, when we pass, if we have not something else than our own naked selves, we shall certainly contract defilement. God will give to the penitent man, if he will have it, that which will keep his feet from soil, even when they walk amidst filth. And if, at any time, notwithstanding the defence, some mud should stain the foot, and he that is washed needs again to wash his feet, the Master, with the towel and the basin, will not be far away.

There are enemies and dangers in life. A very important part of the equipment of the soldier in antiquity was the heavy boot, which enabled him to stand fast, and resist the rush of the enemy. God will give to the penitent man, if he will have it, that which will set his foot upon a rock, "and establish his going," and which "will make him able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

Brethren, defence, stability, shielding from pains, and protection against evil are all included in this

great promise, which each of us may realise, if we will, for ourselves.

IV.—Lastly, the Feast.

Now that comes into view in the parable, mainly as teaching us the great truth that Heaven keeps holiday, when some poor waif comes shrinking back to his Father. But I do not touch upon that truth now, though it is the main significance of this last part of the story.

The prodigal was half starving, and the fatted calf was killed "for him," as his ill-conditioned brother grumbled. Remember what it was that drove him back—not his heart, nor his conscience, but his stomach. He did not bethink himself to go back, because dormant filial affection woke up, or because a sense that he had been wrong stirred in him, but because he was hungry; and well he might be, when "the husks that the swine did eat" were luxuries beyond his reach. Thank God for the teaching that even so low a motive as that is accepted by God; and that, if a man goes back, even for no better reason—as long as he does go back, he will be welcomed to the Father. This poor boy was quite content to sink his sonship for the sake of a loaf; and all that he wanted was to stay his hunger. So he had to learn that he could not get bread on the terms that he desired, and that what he wished most was not what he needed first. He had to be forgiven and bathed in the outflow of his father's love before he could be fed. And, being thus received, he could not fail to be fed. So the message for us is, first, forgiveness, and then every hunger of the heart satisfied; all desires met; every

needful nourishment communicated, and the true bread ours for ever, if we choose to eat. "The meek shall eat and be satisfied."

I need not draw the picture—that picture of which there are many originals sitting in these pews to-night—of the men that go for ever roaming with a hungry heart, through all the regions of life separate from God; and whether they seek their nourishment in the garbage of the sty, or whether fastidiously they look for it in the higher nutriment of mind and intellect and heart, still are condemned to be unfilled.

Brethren, "why do you spend your money for that . . . which satisfies not?" Here is the true way for all desires to be appeased. Go to God in Jesus Christ for forgiveness, and then everything that you need shall be yours. "I counsel thee to buy of Me . . . white raiment that thou mayest be clothed." "He that eateth of this bread shall live for ever."



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